

**TOUCHING MAURICE: A BODY-BASED READING OF RAVEL'S *ONDINE***

by

MAX HYLTON SMITH

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This thesis was presented

by

Max Hylton Smith

It was defended on

September 7, 2012

and approved by

Lester C. Olson, Ph.D., Department of Communication

Deane L. Root, Ph.D., Department of Music

Thesis Director: James P. Cassaro, MLS, Department of Music

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Max Hylton Smith, M.A.

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Even in the most self-conscious scholarship, to cite Ravel's *pudeur* is to run the risk of representing a one dimensional type, or erecting an all-too-familiar cardboard cutout of the composer's dandified façade and the musical artifice seen as its product. Although recent scholarship (e.g., that of Lloyd Whitesell and Michael Puri) has advanced discussions of Ravel's queerness beyond the nervous speculation of twentieth-century biographers, our ability to give shape to his person remains today limited by traditional assumptions of where to locate subjectivity and of what counts as legitimate subjective knowledge. Instead of raiding the archives with new vigor, or avoiding the issue of subjectivity altogether, I propose a different solution: to reframe the so-called problem in order that "knowing" Ravel becomes far less complicated than decoding musical structures or deciphering hidden metaphors. Rather, as I argue, Ravel stands forth for us already, as a physical being, embodied time-and-again through the performance of his special brand of virtuosic pianism.

Extending the contextual work of Mary Louise Roberts and Gurminder Bhogal and the choreographic studies of Daphne Leong, David Korevaar, and especially Elisabeth Le Guin, I connect *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of gender to the ornamental body logic exemplified in the solo piece *Ondine*. Ravel's score not only indexes a certain style of dandified comportment, but it incorporates modern performers within an ongoing story. Grounded by *Ondine*'s culture-steeped choreography, a pianist cites an historical catalogue of queer gesture, enlisting sources that range

from Roman oratory to British chirology, from Ovid to Michelangelo, from Ancient etymology to popular cartoons. I read Ravel's employment of patriarchal symbols as essential to a hyperbolic, proto-camp aesthetic that challenges musical (as well as a broader cultural) normativity. Operative within Judith Butler's concept of revision, such a performance carves out subjective space for those to whom the privileged terms of wholeness, sincerity, and substance have been least kind. Though *Ondine*'s effect on collective bodily ideals lends this study a diachronic breadth beyond the experience of any single person, my own relationship with Ravel through his music betrays itself as the origin of a confessional, even carnal, grammar.

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## **PREFACE**

Though there are many to thank, I especially appreciate the members of my thesis committee for their guidance, in particular, Professor Root for his editorial wisdom and practical example, Professor Olson for his encouragement in the early formulation of the topic, and my advisor Jim for his endless patience and bibliographic direction. I also thank my friend from Sewanee, Dr. Waring McCrady, for his faith and support.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is ironic, given Ravel's famous coldness, that he should relate so sensually to myriad people he will never know. With an almost mythical status, the corporeal effects of his music beg for epicurean readings, as if the composer could locate via the ear a listener's tickle spots or pleasure points. In popular culture, too, Ravel's music is understood to bestow favors on its listeners, whether enhancing a sexual experience with mechanistic thrusts or bathing the body in luscious orchestration. At least in recent memory, the 1989 motion picture *10* has bolstered Ravel's association with the erotic, making it nearly impossible to hear *Bolero* without also picturing the buxom actress Bo Derek prancing sea-soaked and half-naked down a tropical beach: an image merely gratuitous to the film's more explicit sexualization of *Bolero* as, according to the heroine, her favorite music to "screw" to.<sup>1</sup> Even among audiences of less popular sorts of knowledge, talk of Ravel's eroticism floats around with an air of legend. After hearing, through a sort of musicology locker-room talk, more than one incredulous account of that orgasmic chord in *Daphnis*—"that chord!" representing sexual climax so powerfully as to induce the same state in its listeners—I began to wonder about music's carnality. Though the idea presented itself through naughty whispers and rather smutty pop cinema, it rang true enough to me to activate a host of questions, as if they had lain dormant in my mind as implicit products of past experience:

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<sup>1</sup> Bo Derek, "10 – Part 9," YouTube video, 10:03, from Warner Brothers' *10*, dir. Blake Edwards, 1979, posted by "CarmenDoni," June 16, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIft8Ym6\\_MI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIft8Ym6_MI).

How does the body act as a site of musical meaning? How does music act as a site of bodily meaning? And how can such questions resonate so compellingly with bodily existence while seeming inert to more sustained, word-based discourses? It seemed to me that the corporeal significance of music carried real immanence and weight while also, and confusedly, going undetected by the careful scales and measures of traditional musicology.

My questions seemed not only too basic for the specialized methods of musical analysis but also too fleshy and passionate to make some disinterested claim about a given composer or piece. For sure, my own love of Ravel (and especially his piano works) could provide the kernel of historical substance that might lend a sense of legitimacy and structure to an argument. Yet the true object of study has remained less solid and more ethereal, less of a situated artifact and more of a phenomenon shared among human bodies. Especially in my case, scholarship revealed itself to be much less than a devotion to historical fact with its bottomless trove of secrets and to be, more simply, a hunger for self-knowledge, an acknowledgment that the histories we tell are mere constructs shaped by present desires. My efforts to understand Ravel and his musical objects have become more expressly an analysis of the mechanism through which I experience those objects: my culturally situated body. Building on Elisabeth Le Guin's concept of *carnal musicology*, which "bears witness to the genuinely reciprocal relationship between performer and composer—even when the latter is no longer living,"<sup>2</sup> the current analysis focuses on the phenomenological experience (necessarily my own) of playing Ravel's

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

*Ondine*.<sup>3</sup> It seeks out the ways a performer's knowledge of physical process intersects with and enriches more "academic" types of knowledge one might equate with historical pith.

Far from an attempt to degrade the necessary work of empirical research, a body-based investigation appends the factual history with subjective commentary; it refuses the boundary between traditional categories of knowledge (between subject and object) and expands musical analysis beyond those things which carry the epistemological weight of fact. That is, beyond the notes of *Ondine*'s score, and beyond the configurations of matter that make up each scene of Ravel's biography, exists a reconcilable realm of the heaving chest and the fleeting fancy. If, due to practical reasons, the historian must begin with the world of concrete things (the nouns) passed down by time, then the next step would be to find the adjectives, verbs, and adverbs that adorn the otherwise lifeless story. This is not to say simply that scholarship ought to emulate high-definition (HD) video recording but, rather, that scholarship limited to traditional notions of what counts as knowledge may forfeit a layer of bodily relevance, forgetting the subject to be a sentient agent whose every movement betrays a desire. In other words, the tableaux which make up our histories become more meaningful when one can identify with the historical subject, feeling the figure's blushed cheeks as one's own. In this more empathic sort of history, one may find not only a sequence of scenic configurations but a genealogy of the subject, so that the shape and arrangements of the objects we inherit from the past are read as derivatives of a more sensuous discourse, a discourse that takes on ethical weight precisely because its most recent scenes are performed by us, the readers, ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> My performance of the piece in its entirety (Video A) will be referenced in segments throughout the argument.

## 1.1 EXISTING ANALYSES OF *ONDINE*

In the case of music, scholars are lucky in their inherited object of study. As part of an immense, impossibly dispersed history of human action, the musical score persists with relative stability, inspiring at any moment a sequence of movements mappable within a rather narrow grid: be it the eighty-eight keys of a piano, or the length of a cello's neck. The reason Ravel's piano music offers an especially telling case of inscribed motion is that his musical aesthetic shares a certain ornamentality with a broader cultural aesthetic. Evidence of Ravel's participation in a discourse of ornament surfaces almost by default in scholarly studies because of its prominence in his work and his life, yet scholarship has not paid due attention to the ways in which the body acts, through motion *per se*, as an agent of Ravel's art. By inserting the element of gesture into scholarly formulations, and specifically those of *Ondine*, one may render Ravel more vividly among the queer aestheticians of *fin-de-siècle* Paris.



**Video A: Maurice Ravel, *Ondine* (entire piece)**

Analyses of *Ondine* show the piece's style and form to align with contemporaneous discourses aimed at disrupting artistic conventions. *Ondine* contains all of the signposts of a sonata-form work: a primary theme's establishment of the tonal center (C# major), a second theme's modulation to the dominant V (G# major), a development of the previous thematic material, and a return to the tonic key via recapitulation of the two main themes.<sup>4</sup> Yet, along with the many sonata-form works of Ravel,<sup>5</sup> *Ondine* manages to cite such traditional formal structures while maintaining a rhetorical, ironic distance from them. For instance, the home key of C# is only established six measures into the piece, until which time the melody dances around the key of the subdominant, thereby acquiring the mixolydian inflection<sup>6</sup> that colors the theme's subsequent statements. Although, by moving to the dominant, the second theme<sup>7</sup> confirms C# as the piece's tonal center, the entirety of the so-called exposition<sup>8</sup> denies listeners the feeling of surety normally granted by decisive cadences and patent tertian progressions. The near-constant additive harmonies dampen the effect of their functional chords and contribute to an "abortive tonal logic" that seems to dissuade the many implied dominants from resolving tonally.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of aural fixity created by Ravel's tonal scheme is intensified by the character of his sinuous melodies and their relationship to the surrounding watery accompaniment. Dancing

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<sup>4</sup> See **Video C** and **Video D** for bare outlines of each of the two main themes, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, "most of Ravel's larger instrumental movements" exploit an underlying thematic sonata scheme; Roy Howat, "Ravel and the Piano" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Here, B natural.

<sup>7</sup> At m. 32.

<sup>8</sup> That is, the first forty-one measures of the piece.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Whitesell, "Erotic Ambiguity in Ravel's Music" in *Ravel Studies*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 83.



Figure 1: *Ondine*, theme 1, mm. 2-5<sup>10</sup>



Figure 2: *Ondine*, theme 2, mm. 32-35

through frequent meter changes,<sup>11</sup> and avoiding predictable, symmetrical periods, *Ondine*'s melody weaves itself "into a gently relentless fabric of rhythmic and metrical ambiguity."<sup>12</sup> Because of the simple, meandering quality of the melodic themes, one theme may easily evoke the contour or rhythm of another.<sup>13</sup> With a lack of strong differentiation between much of the

<sup>10</sup> See **Video A**, 0:08-0:25.

<sup>11</sup> In the piece's 91 measures, there are 52 changes between  $\frac{2}{4}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{4}{4}$ , and  $\frac{5}{4}$  meters; Stephen Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 247.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>13</sup> Most of the melodic material is derivative of previously-heard material; for example, what one might call the first transition theme (m. 17) seems to grow out of the consequent



melodic material, the showy, volatile nature of the surrounding texture takes on the structural role of delineating and marking the character of each section. Becoming evermore insistent amid the supple musical lines, the accompaniment swells most emphatically throughout the development section, rising at times as a focal point above the prominence of the melody.<sup>14</sup> Ravel thus effects “a textural ambiguity whereby the central tune intermittently loses its status as a stable melodic entity amid the mercurial arpeggiation,”<sup>15</sup> so as to confuse the hierarchy of musical substance and ornament (its ontological inferior).<sup>16</sup>

While the filigree grows, mounting tension from two “operatically contrasted themes”<sup>17</sup> prepares the listener for what promises to be a miraculous recapitulation, one that indeed rises to a climax “beyond anything Ravel had so far written.”<sup>18</sup> However, instead of returning to the opening theme in C# major, the moment of release spills forth in a whole-tone statement of the second theme above a profusion of B-minor accompaniment.<sup>19</sup> Despite an enharmonic hint of the home key at bar 65, the final thirty-four measures only gradually slide back to C# major,

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phrase of theme 1 (m. 4), only to become an antecedent in its own right; Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Faure, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 47-8.

<sup>14</sup> For example, mm. 42-4 and 47-9 (see Figures 7 and 10 below).

<sup>15</sup> Whitesell, “Erotic Ambiguity,” 82-3.

<sup>16</sup> Bhogal uses spatial dichotomies, such as surface and depth, to describe the interaction between ornament and the material it would traditionally support. Because ornament interacts “in a powerful, disruptive way with deep-level events,” she explains, “we are betrayed by our conventional expectations of ornament's role as peripheral”; Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, “Arabesque and Metric Dissonance in the Music of Maurice Ravel” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2004), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Howat, “Ravel,” 82.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 101.

<sup>19</sup> See Figure 3; B minor functions here as the minor subdominant of the subdominant, F# (Bhogal, 139).

glancing at multiple keys along the way.<sup>20</sup> During these measures, the displaced primary theme resurfaces via the dominant and slips ironically down a tritone to D minor, where the accompaniment fizzles out altogether. Completely naked for the first time, *Ondine*'s tune punctuates the piece with a final placid moment just before erupting into an octatonic cadenza that leads back to undulations of the tonic arpeggio.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 3: *Ondine*, recapitulation, mm. 64-7<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Passing through C (m. 73), F# (m. 75), G# (m. 80), and D minor (m. 85), as traced by Bhogal in her dissertation.

<sup>21</sup> See **Figure 4**.

<sup>22</sup> See **Video A**, 3:58-4:17.

Aside from Ravel's jeering twist on sonata form, the piece's ambiguous aesthetic also maps aptly onto its poetic program, one which, itself, ironizes a more conventional story. As part of a collection of epigrammatic prose poems loosely connected by an "obsession with demons, ghosts, and the whole world of the supernatural,"<sup>23</sup> Aloysius Bertrand's *Ondine* (1841) rehashes the favorite Romantic, little-mermaid tale as a brief hallucination of the rambling narrator, Gaspard.<sup>24</sup> The water sprite materializes outside of his window, first as a vague harmony, then a sad voice, then a beautiful suppliant, presenting in a series of strange vignettes the watery riches she promises as a dowry.<sup>25</sup> Condensing the poem's narrative allows it to align with select structural events of the music: the same "vague harmonie" and "voix triste" from Bertrand's epigram may be heard in Ravel's version when, from within the murmuring subdominant tremolo of the opening, rises the first theme. The transient sampling of melodies and textures that ensues, and takes us through the climax of the recapitulation, may be heard as an aural equivalent to the montage of scenes presented to the poem's narrator.<sup>26</sup> In both prose and music, the nymph's tempting offers prove ineffective. Rejected by the narrator, who claimed to be involved with a mortal woman, Ondine "cried a few tears, burst out laughing, and vanished" back into the droplets lining the windowpane. The musical rendering of this narrative

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<sup>23</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 100.

<sup>24</sup>As Siglind Bruhn argues, Bertrand's departure from the traditional mermaid myth is achieved through a shifted subject position. The narrator's position as both storyteller and protagonist suggests a possible psychotic origin of the tale's imagery; Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), 184-85.

<sup>25</sup> See **Appendix A** for Bertrand's poem.

<sup>26</sup> Bruhn's analysis takes this type of programmatic logic to an extreme, positing a structural correspondence that links specific thematic statements with the characters presented in the poem (pp. 186-8).

crux comes with the final thematic statement, when Ondine's most direct and unadorned plea turns into the cackling cadenza [Figure 4].

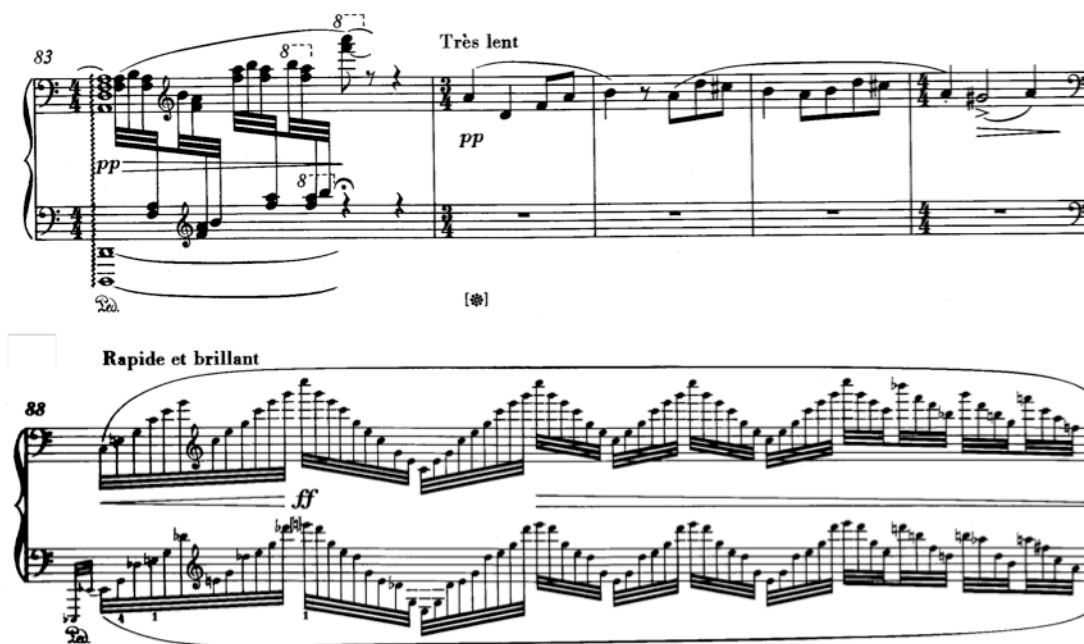


Figure 4: *Ondine*, final plea and cackle, mm. 83-8<sup>27</sup>

Reading both musical and poetic versions side-by-side enhances their cultural import. Although immediately obvious parallels exist between the poem's aquatic language and the murky sonorities of the impressionist idiom, the finer details of Ravel's style (metric, rhythmic, thematic, formal, as well as harmonic) entwine more intricately with the poem as an historical object. In her 2004 dissertation, Gurminder Bhogal shows Ravel's style to reflect an interdisciplinary interest in ornament that characterized much artwork from the period: "The primal, 'exotic,' irrational, and natural qualities of archaic ornament captured the imagination of *fin-de-siècle* artists by offering a fresh impetus for the formation of a modernist aesthetic."<sup>28</sup> The over-florid accompaniments in *Ondine*, for instance, operate in tandem with analogous flourishes

<sup>27</sup> See **Video A**, 5:20-5:50.

<sup>28</sup> Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, "Arabesque and Metric Dissonance in the Music of Maurice Ravel" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2004), 58.

in other mediums. Graphic decoration broke free from its frame to whirl around the foreground as the very subject of a tableau, for example, in the Art Nouveau of *Les Nabis* and, later, *Les Fauves*.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the conventional frames that bound literary form gave way to digression and formal fluidity in the writing of the Decadents. As Bhogal notes, Huysman's novel *A Rebours* (1884) epitomizes *fin-de-siècle* decadence in its emulation of the topos of ornament explored by certain prescient Romantics such as Poe and Schlegel.<sup>30</sup> Our own Bertrand served as another such posthumous model for the decorative aesthetic, his *Ondine* and its containing book being an early exercise in limning the boundaries between style and substance. Bertrand composes his work "out of precisely those elements of narrative prose which are, as it were, least essential or most marginal to its diegesis: descriptions, anecdotes, vignettes, in short, those elements which are often construed as superfluous or merely ornamental digressions from the forward thrust of narrative." As Bertrand's artistic partner, then, Ravel re-orders the formal hierarchy between theme and accompaniment, making another, musical entry into the critique of structural convention.

Yet the *fin-de-siècle* appropriation of Romantic ornament did not operate so simply in abstract terms, of frame and tableau, surface and substance (bereft of broader connotations and ethical consequences). Huysman's *A Rebours* does not revel in the possibility of deconstructed categories, like Poe's poetic theory, but uses ornament as a depiction of the "hysteria, disease, nostalgia, seduction, and demise" of a decadent sensibility.<sup>31</sup> The pejorative baggage implicit in the concept of ornament thus took on newly-found weight, so that, perhaps more than ever, citing

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<sup>29</sup> Bhogal cites the Art Nouveau of Gauguin and his camp, *Les Nabis*, for their interest in flat, vegetal motifs that grow to cover entire tableaux (p. 77). *Les Fauves* also brought ornament to the foreground, specifically in their landscapes (Bhogal, 82).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

ornament meant also citing the exotic, the feral, the alluring, and the feminine. At this time, the artistic and literary figure of the *femme fatale* rose with unprecedented prominence, and chief among her highly decorated representatives was none other than our siren, Ondine.<sup>32</sup> As far as Ravel invests his Ondine in the trappings of a duly tragic vixen, one may read the composition as a portrait of modern malaise not unlike contemporaneous works of art and literature. In the broadest and most sustained of such readings, Bhogal finds the work to represent “the tragic emasculation of yet another *femme fatale*” whose ornamental voice, by the final measures, is silenced:

...the narrator reinstates reason, clarity, and logic in place of a world that thrives on sensation, feeling, and emotion...Ravel fulfills our association of rhythmic, metric, hypermetric, and tonal stability with tropes of heroism and triumph; he thus metes out a traditional punishment to the audacious, seductive, and brazen *femme fatale*.<sup>33</sup>

The extent to which Ravel tames or chastises<sup>34</sup> his title character—as opposed to celebrating her escape from the margins and ascent toward a subject position<sup>35</sup>—remains to be debated. Nevertheless, Ravel’s involvement in a culture whose notions of substance, artifice, and style hold highly-contested, practical significance is undeniable. In whatever way one formulates the fate of Bertrand’s nymph, the discussion continues to operate at the highest of

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<sup>32</sup> Ondine was “the first representational figure in High Art Nouveau”; Wayne Anderson and Barbara Klein, *Gauguin’s Paradise Lost* (New York: Viking, 1974), 118; quoted in Bhogal, 184; see also Bruhn, who pinpoints Bertrand’s Ondine as a significant departure from the more pathetic little mermaid perhaps better known to Romantic audiences of the time; the poem’s psychological aesthetic effects narrative distance between audience and nymph, now cast as the other (pp. 181-85).

<sup>33</sup> Bhogal, 176-77.

<sup>34</sup> Bhogal uses the phrase “authorial condemnation” (p. 121).

<sup>35</sup> I.e., a reading I would more readily make.

stakes, making pronouncements over our conceptions of gender as it is reified through the real-world terms of meaning, worth, and power.

By suggesting that Ravel's tragic treatment of *Ondine* might portray "an alternative cultural narrative in which *Ondine*'s sense of loss signifies Ravel's own defeat [before a harsh musical establishment]," Bhogal hints at the body of ethical questions that might follow her more orthodox analysis.<sup>36</sup> To transition from *Ondine*'s body to that of the composer is not merely to posit an autobiographical intent (conscious or not). But asking how the composer himself may be seen within the music is to enter the realm of a different logic, one which seeks out the authorial handprint in every object of human fashion. An extension of the existing discussions of *Ondine* might focus on Ravel's music not as an object of analysis but an object of desire. The representation of a mermaid, her sensuous curves and provocative gestures, is at base a representation of the composer's body as it negotiates the constraints of a misogynist culture. From what we know of Ravel, his seemingly repressed sexuality, and his contentious relationship with normative power structures, musical analysis will need to go beyond simply listing his work among all of the other citations of an exoticized and punished femininity. Doing justice to Ravel would mean somehow reconciling the charged terms of *Ondine*'s musical program with his own queer movement in the world.

But even if *Ondine* were "yet another" typified entry beneath the *femme fatale* heading, even if Ravel meant (at whatever level of consciousness) to assume a position of patriarchal authority over the nymph, our ability to imagine a queerer Ravel ought to rest as an important sort of possibility. Our ability to imagine within the empirical evidence a Ravel who challenges misogyny, through the creative re-working of its own terms, would seem the only hope for

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<sup>36</sup> Bhogal, 137.

modern-day sympathizers and the tool *par excellence* of the queer theorist. Despite the vastly divergent pictures painted, on the one hand, by a normative reading and, on the other, by a queer reading, the primary difference on the scholar's end is a mere cock of the head. To read Ravel's feminine excess as counter-discursive requires a second degree of interpretive distance, wherefrom we detect a furtive wink. As if to wrench open the realm of silent miming beneath normative structures of signification, the scholar takes this glint of irony as an invitation for alternative interpretation; one becomes privy to a subterranean language of manner, a system of gestures operating at the bounds of normal signs. By locating meaning within the manner (rather than substance) of delivery, one is able to map previously unspeakable registers of subjective expression. Indeed, queer meaning does not pronounce itself in the spectacle *per se* but, rather, emanates from backstage among the pulleys and ropes—the mechanics of artifice made knowable to us, today, only through the act of imagining.

If this operative verb “imagine” underscores the remoteness from which we dream up or conjure an historical subject, it also reflects the lability of the process, as Ravel's figure takes shape beneath our temperamental hands. Although we do not “imagine,” as the verb suggests, in pictorial forms exactly, our wordy medium is no less impressionable than an artist's pigment or a sculptor's clay. That is to say, even while we represent Ravel, we also betray our own subjective presence, as the stories we choose to tell reveal themselves to be, ultimately, of present fashion. My analysis of *Ondine* thus employs a rhetorical point of view, where a scholar's grammar becomes the medium not only through which history is told, but through which the present state of things is said into being. The so-called “fact” is taken, more honestly, to be a matter of style, and the way something is said, its syntax, mood, and paragraph structure, is proven inseparable from a truthful pith, thought to lie between or behind the letters (or notes) on the page. As far as



grammar comes to matter in this way (i.e., effecting the material configurations of society), one cannot take lightly the diction and syntax used to tell a story. Ondine's tale may indeed have been one of chastisement meted out by a misogynistic narrator; yet, under our pens, it does not have to be. We might well choose to have the nymph return to reign in her dazzling excess and to see Ravel himself robed in the same glittery gown.

It is thus in the spirit of the rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke that I attempt a carnal reading of *Ondine*. Burke's idea of symbolic drama "carries the all-encompassing implication that life itself, insofar as it is experienced by symbolizing animals, consists largely, if not entirely, of rhetorically enacted performances or displays."<sup>37</sup> By providing the vocabulary for reading symbolic dramas, Burke sets the stage for an "action-based approach to epistemology," through which rhetorical actors do not have to speak their truths through the privileged mode of language in order to be heard.<sup>38</sup> But the unspoken actions of the subaltern may be re-said after the fact, brought into the realm of legitimized meaning to stake claims on a more valued existence. Extant in relation to such liminal subjects, then, must be a re-figured model of the historical object. The Burkean theorist holds little hope in a crusty folio: preserved from shifting cultural climates in an airtight container; scanned by microscopic lenses that mediate the distance between us and a document always seen but never touched. The carnal musicologist does not approach the score in order merely to behold it, with the telescopic senses of seeing and hearing, but *Ondine* waits to be held. Like a weatherworn shell, Ravel's score needs touched by a person

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence J. Prelli, "Rhetorics of Display: An Introduction," in *Rhetorics of Display*, ed. Lawrence J. Prelli (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>38</sup> M. Elizabeth Weiser, *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2008), 3.

empathetic to its curves and grooves, one who identifies with its passionate scars enough to say them aloud.

As the narrators of this drama, we realize that our darnedest efforts to do justice to poorly represented queer figures more truly operate on our own bodies in the present state of things. To whatever extent bodies comprise the subject of this thesis, so this thesis comprises its subjects' bodies. That is, the voice I give to Ravel remains also my own, its resonating cavity shared. Though Ravel and I remain separate in some literal sense (he buried in southern France and me sitting in Pittsburgh), our mutual constitution through the following text spells a conjugation more than grammatical and more than fantastic, but one that draws the gaze of the *voyeur*.

To interpret my carnal language as clever leitmotif or risqué *double entendre* would be to foreground the style/substance dichotomy and the limiting epistemological structures which I hope to suspend. Thus, the language of corporal intimacy serves not as stylistic flourish or mere allusion to a practice separate from the musical topic at hand. Difficult though it may be (without recourse to metaphoric glue), I urge the reader to grasp the argument in hand, to study its curves, and, most of all, to proceed with pleasure. For it traces the contour of not one body but two, adjoined.

## 1.2 THESIS OVERVIEW

Having examined the existing renditions of Ravel's *Ondine*, I choose to recast the drama so as to highlight the composer's participation in a critique of normative society. In Section 2, *Ondine*'s *mise-en-scène* is set anew, and the nymph is dressed in a timelier gown of the *fin-de-siècle* French lady. Although, as we saw above, the rise of decorative styles necessitated more frequent

citations of the pejorated idea of ornament—risking its reinscription through specific tropes such as the *femme fatale*—ornament’s proliferation also served as a means of challenging its relationship to power. Using Mary Louise Roberts’ concept of disruptive action, we may interpret *fin-de-siècle* ornament as one of the newly-critiqued props of gender signification. Certain prettified women, such as Marguerite Durand, utilized their culturally inherited gender to prove inessential the association between ornament and impotence. Likewise, dandified men embraced gendered signifiers in deconstructive ways, emphasizing an inherent theatricality that culminated with the flamboyance of Oscar Wilde. By placing such figures on our stage, one may see Ravel’s ornament (whether in his music or on his person) as having the same critical potential as other cooptive citations of his time. If the more traditional analysis of *Ondine* above shows the music to extend beyond its medium to speak along with other ornamental arts (literature and painting), Section 2 of my thesis shows music to reach for an even broader social critique, in which artistic ornament participates in a discourse headed by the more general category of particularity.

Talking about Ravel in terms of gender and sexuality is not a new practice; his enigmatic personal life was published in such terms as early as 1939, the year after his death.<sup>39</sup> But only in the past decade have writers focused critically on the discourse. In a self-cautionary move, Section 3 points out the problems inherent in the language with which the musicological community has traditionally written about Ravel and emphasizes the need for a continued scrutiny of our historical practice. For without such scrutiny, our key descriptive terms threaten to perpetuate poor estimations of Ravel’s works as crippled attempts at self-expression, or

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<sup>39</sup> See Emile Vuillermoz, “l’Oeuvre de Maurice Ravel,” in Colette et al., *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (Paris: Editions du tambourinaire, 1939), 65; cited in Whitesell, “Erotic Ambiguity,” 74.

byproducts of a normativity fallen short of its goal. By questioning the language of imposture and sincerity, I challenge the set of values with which we ascribe meaning to a musical work and thereby open the discussion for a less authorized investigation of ornament and its bodily correlates. It is thus in light of the willful ignorance with which early scholarship rendered the composer that we desire a more intimate sort of knowledge. Sharing the postmodern interest in “deconstructing the usual binary between the self and other,”<sup>40</sup> Section 3 affirms the importance of considering a more empathic (because corporal) epistemology.<sup>41</sup>

Having set the cultural stage and double-checked our theoretical equipment, Section 4 refocuses on the object of study, this time with its subject attached. *Ondine* proves to be something more than a series of chord progressions representative of an encoded truth but, rather, exists itself as a true recording of Ravel’s body and, by extension, evidence of his investment in a certain style of bodily motion. Because the piano served as Ravel’s privileged instrument, where his ornamental idiom found its most fluid expression, one may treat the score as a means of imagining Ravel’s comportment. A sampling of the many choreographic moments in *Ondine* allows for a distillation of what we might call Ravelian particularity as it adjusts itself to the layout of a keyboard. Implied in these findings is a joint between the nominal and verbal parts of existence. If we understand a person’s habitual motion (one deep-seated, perhaps unconscious source of identity) to be a primary mode of arranging the literal matter of one’s world, then a movement-based reading of *Ondine* has much to say about its maker. Section 4

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<sup>40</sup> Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, “Bodies Together: Touch, Ethics, and Disability” in *Disability/Postmodernity*, ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65.

<sup>41</sup> Implicit in my discussion is the idea that intellectual boundaries differ from their physiological counterparts in degree alone, not in category, so that the proverbial “biblical” knowledge sits (albeit distantly) on the same continuum as that which we seek daily in scholarly research and colloquia.

attempts to articulate the reciprocal connection between art objects and those who fashion them, asserting that, in effect, Ravel makes *Ondine* as much as *Ondine* makes Ravel. To read *Ondine* thus as a worked-on object, rather than a piece of metaphorical correspondence, permits a more useful and satisfying type of knowing—one that, as we shall see in the final sections, collapses the distance between Ravel and ourselves.

If Ravel's music directs the performer through elegant choreography (wrist bends, dazzling flourishes, and dancelike cross-overs), we have, here, nothing more than a catalogue of elegant movement. Divorced as it may be from broader connotations, however, the mincing hand motion mapped in Section 4 necessarily carries for each of us a set of pre-packaged meanings. Building again off of Naomi Schor's writing on particularity, Section 5 maps out the structure of those pre-packaged meanings, by citing salient historical moments that define our collective perception of gendered motion. Focusing on the type of movement exemplified in Ravel's *Ondine*, I explore manuality through a sampling of etymology, archaeology, mythology, visual art, elocutionary theory, and pop images. Instead of telling a linear story, such a variegated group of sources acts more like a constellation within our cultural memory, giving a certain (misogynist) rhyme and reason to seemingly instinctual associations. *Ondine*'s performers thus find themselves within a lineage of othered groups marked by effeminacy, speciousness, and vacuity.

The final section comprises what some might call the musicological "meat" of the thesis. After laying out the concept of a body-based reading, entertaining its theoretical problems, and freighting its terms with the weight of cultural memory, the score remains to be perused. Understood to be a gendered prop with as much vitality today as ever, Ravel's score implies a line of diachronic activity stringing together its many players. I discuss these diachronic

implications within two subsections that focus, in turn, on the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler. First, viewed through the lens of bodily perception, in an indulgent section, the pianist gains subjectivity through her virtual proximity to Ravel's body and finds within this visceral communion a self-sufficient type of knowledge. Immediately, then, queer theory sweeps the subject away, involving it in a discourse of cultural revision. Butler's theory of citation allows the hyperfemininity of *Ondine* to act counter-discursively against the aims of the masculine order. As exemplified by two focused excerpts from Ravel's score, hyperbolic ornament and melodic disruption give the pianist discursive leverage against the Academy's ideals of continuity and substance, spelling miniature, cumulative triumphs for each re-iteration of Ravel's original queerness.

## 2.0 MISE EN SCENE, OR DECKING RAVEL'S STAGE

In her book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Naomi Schor traces the history of particularity, that is, the conceiving of any one thing as a “part” of something else, or defining anything by its status as secondary to a thing, some “substance,” more solid and self-sufficient. The West did not merely conceive of particulars as secondary to their general categories but, rather, submitted particulars as inconceivable without those general categories that permitted their existence. The rules of grammar illustrate the hierarchy most germinally. That is, sentence structures themselves are supported by nominal pillars—named things, or nouns,<sup>42</sup> which form the load-bearing walls of a statement and which stand with a noble disregard for the complimentary parts of speech that may or may not decorate them. Thus integrated into the very concept of “concept,” the particle/substance division betrays its ever-presence. While inscribing strict maintenance over the *idea* of particularity, Schor explains, the particle/substance hierarchy also did the more practical work of circumscribing and othering cultural groups who became associated with that idea, particularly the feminine.<sup>43</sup> Even as we expose the hierarchy and its unjust work, “we remain, of course, prisoners of the paradigms, only just barely able to dream a

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<sup>42</sup> Called *substantifs* in French.

<sup>43</sup> Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), 16-17.

universe where the categories of *general* and *particular*, *mass* and *detail*, and *masculine* and *feminine* would no longer order our thinking and seeing.”<sup>44</sup>

The story Schor traces is thus an unending one, within which the gradual ascent of artistic ornament since the Renaissance reaches a special, self-conscious place in the gender politics of *fin-de-siècle* France. It was during this period that Ravel, a social and musical adolescent, absorbed the symbolic language of a gender-bent Paris to forge at the turn of the century a unique brand of ornamental pianism exemplified in *Ondine*. Building on the wealth of research that connects Ravel to a discourse of particularity, one may place him more literally as a physical “actor” within that discourse. Approached through a motion-based analysis, the musical score ceases to be the object of scholarship and becomes an index to bodily desire that implicates Ravel as a performer among other ornament-laden characters: seductive *frondeuse* Margerite Durand,<sup>45</sup> god(dess) of the theatre Sarah Bernhardt, and decadent author Oscar Wilde. Embodying such tropes as the “New Woman” and the dandy, such characters interact as stars of *fin-de-siècle* androgyny.<sup>46</sup> Though specially orchestrated (by me), this collusion of political, dramatic, and artistic figures forms the backdrop for a Ravelian version of the tale. It is on this stage, littered with the props of gender signification, that we find Ravel’s most subversive yet least exposed performance: that of his self.

Though scholars have traditionally rendered the final decades of the nineteenth century a time of either moral decay or meliorist fantasy,<sup>47</sup> a more nuanced version by Mary Louise

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>45</sup> The *frondeuses* were the all-woman coterie that produced Paris’s *La Fronde* newspaper.

<sup>46</sup> Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 11.



Roberts reads between traditional narratives of Third-Republic liberalism and the feminist movement to focus on creative acts of subversion. Social dissidents like the “New Woman” challenged epistemologies that had historically refused them recognition. The “New Woman” seized the symbols of particularity and tore them from their traditional gender referents, so that the ornamental role of the domestic wife was swapped for a self-sufficient woman of real intellectual “substance.” As Roberts explains, this disruption of traditional gender roles found a ready outlet in theater, where the performance of non-traditional identities was excused by its theatrical context.<sup>48</sup> Most prominently, actor Sarah Bernhardt’s “duplicitous disruption of gender roles” on stage upturned those epithets which had pejorated femininity: “artificial,” “theatrical,” “false,” and most germanely “ornamental.”<sup>49</sup> Off stage, Bernhardt assumed a role that conformed no less to gender types. In contrast to the chaste beauty of the heroines she portrayed, Bernhardt’s personal life had “raised the iniquity bar to unprecedented levels: posing nude for the photographer Nadar, engaging in prostitution as a young girl, and sleeping with powerful theater directors.”<sup>50</sup>

Invoking the “New Woman,” Bernhardt challenged essentialist notions of gender identity, as if to re-present to the world the presumed and arbitrary rules of material grammar: if the masculine, unadorned noun was indeed the pillar of society, it was not by essence so. And, in turn, the grammatical particulars deemed inconceivable without their nominal counterparts were imbued with new practical weight. For women like the *frondeuses*, who had leapt to positions of social independence and political power, ornament was reclaimed in a rhetorical

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<sup>48</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 168

way. Going against official feminist views, *frondeuse* editor-in-chief Marguerite Durand reassessed the onus of “prettying oneself,” asserting that “beauty, in the form of seduction, was power.”<sup>51</sup> She, like Bernhardt, was not beholden to categories that lumped together femininity, ornament, and social impotence but managed to exist powerfully in a category of her own. Durand was thus a “living, breathing rebuttal” to the injustice of the particle/substance hierarchy, her famously lavish gowns draped from the body of a woman who had borne a child out of wedlock.<sup>52</sup> With similar irony, her halo of blonde hair was, simultaneously, the means of her hypersexualization as an object of the male gaze and of her ascendance to political power. Durand dared to reject a lady’s proper social inheritance for that more typical of an agentic man and, all the while, adorned such subversive action in signs of docility, frivolity, and ineffectuality. She was a walking oxymoron.

Durand’s embrace of a stigmatized femininity illustrates the cooptive mode of operation that characterizes subversive discourse: the “New Woman” appropriates traditional markers in order to reassess the validity of those very markers.<sup>53</sup> From a male vantage, dandyism operated through the same system of ironic ornamentation: a subverted privileging of things decorative and refined. While “New Women” wrapped themselves in ornament of an almost hyperbolic bent, however, the dandy employed ornament in a more suppressed and micromanaged way. “Taken above all by distinction,” Baudelaire formulates, the dandy “embraces absolute simplicity, which is in fact the best way of being distinguished. He feels the ardent need of

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<sup>51</sup> Roberts, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 65

<sup>53</sup> Foucault’s thought helps us reconceptualize embraced stigma as itself a kind of resistance, operating through “the counter-deployment of the terms of the familiar rather than through an attempted production of the ‘new’”; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 343.

making for himself an originality contained within the exterior limits of convention.”<sup>54</sup> The young Ravel, as the biographer Lerner notes, held himself to such an exacting standard. His “natural taste for personal elegance,” evident as early as age eleven, only intensified with maturity; “he remained an impeccable and style-conscious dresser, the costume always appropriate to the occasion, for the rest of his life.”<sup>55</sup> Anecdotes dotting the biographies confirm Ravel’s steadfast devotion: Ricardo Vines remembers walking with the twenty-year-old Ravel to Chabrier’s funeral, and that, upon arrival, “Ravel wanted to go back home and change his suit and hat because he didn’t feel he was properly dressed.”<sup>56</sup> Sixteen years later, at the premier of *L’Heure espagnole*, “he remarked to a friend: ‘Have you noticed that we are the only ones here not wearing midnight-blue evening jackets?’”<sup>57</sup> And on his tour of America in his early fifties, Stuckenschmidt claims, “Ravel took along fifty shirts.”<sup>58</sup>

For Ravel, and the dandy in general, the careful manipulation of ornament ensured a kind of rhetorical control over one’s bodily signals, acting as an anal-retentive filter which catches unpremeditated action and lets past only the most refined and clear of gestures. Among his other rather vindictive characterizations, biographer Seroff describes a pointed style of comportment:

“Ravel held himself aloof. He spoke in a rather hollow voice without any particular accent. A characteristic mannerism, whenever he made a caustic remark, was to slide his right hand behind his back and standing as though he was about to pirouette, to lower his eyelashes, covering the malicious gleam in his eyes, and to drop his voice in the last part of the sentence. Ravel listened attentively, always letting a few minutes pass in silence as

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *L’art romantique*, ed., Louis Conard (Paris: L’Imprimerie Nationale, 1925), 89.

<sup>55</sup> Gerald Lerner, *Maurice Ravel* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 34.

<sup>56</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1968), 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

though he were turning over in his mind the phrase he had just heard before he finally answered, thus giving the impression of being obstinately argumentative.”<sup>59</sup>

Ravel’s meticulous presentation was an entire performance, of sound, movement, and visual display, tweaked with the precision of his “most elaborate manicure set..., laid out like surgical instruments on a little table” in his home at Montfort l’Amaury.<sup>60</sup> The dandy operated on the superficial, scouring his surface to an immaculate sheen, and then bejeweling it meticulously: a puff of rice powder, a shiny chain, a monographed hanky, a prim flip of the wrist. Ravel’s personal ornaments were placed with similar care: a non-functional monocle,<sup>61</sup> hair tonics and lotions,<sup>62</sup> a long pointed beard, whiskers,<sup>63</sup> fanciful waistcoats,<sup>64</sup> and a “little swagger stick he loved to carry.”<sup>65</sup> At the edges of substance lies the dandy’s unit of meaning: the accessory speaks.

Nonetheless, adorning oneself in such a way most centrally concerns not the ornament itself but the act of ornamenting and of performing that ornamentation: “Dandyism is itself a performance, the performance of a highly stylized, painstakingly constructed self.”<sup>66</sup> The characteristic narcissism and blatant materiality are not in themselves goals; as Baudelaire explains, “the character of the dandy’s beauty consists above all in the cold exterior which comes from the unshakeable resolve not to be moved; one could say, a latent fire which makes itself

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<sup>59</sup> Victor Seroff I., *Maurice Ravel* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), 54.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 224

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Garelick, 3.



**Image 1: Ravel, whiskers and crimped tie, 1907<sup>67</sup>**

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<sup>67</sup> Pierre Petit, "Maurice Ravel," 14x9.5 cm, 1907, Gallica, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb396202280>.

felt, [and] which could, but does not wish to, shine forth.”<sup>68</sup> Ravel’s public image exemplifies such purposeful opacity, one that Roland-Manuel described as elegantly frigid<sup>69</sup> and which, as Barbara Kelly suggests, betrayed “a need for emotional and artistic control.”<sup>70</sup> The dandy prizes most of all that ornamental pretense which elevates him above the human desires that direct bodily emotion. Even though the dandy and the “New Woman” use symbol-employment as an active rhetorical language, their respective rhetorical devices differ. Whereas the female rhetorician uses high-voltage devices, such as hyperbole or oxymoron, which push against millennia of submission to effect change, the male understandably employs more subtle devices (perhaps litotes or the dramatic aside), allowing for a modicum of desirous expression while also concealing a socially unsafe desire.

In the figure of Oscar Wilde, the dandy’s categorical bounds are most clearly delineated—because destroyed. Arrested in 1895 under suspicion of “gross indecency” through homosexual acts, Wilde served the maximum (yet “totally inadequate”, according to the judge) sentence of two years’ hard labor.<sup>71</sup> That the public figure of the dandy should be caught in and prosecuted for a most basic act of human desire undoes him by definition; his stoic cover blown away, the dandy is exposed as a denizen of the real world, where people suffer for, and strive to satisfy, their bodies’ wishes. While failing to fulfill the dandy’s *sine qua non*, Wilde reveals the larger social goal of personal concealment: dandyism was neither mere amusement for the

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<sup>68</sup> Le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l’air froid qui vient de l’inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému; on dirait un feu latent qui se fait deviner, qui pourrait mais qui ne veut pas rayonner (Baudelaire, 77).

<sup>69</sup> Claude Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1947), 35.

<sup>70</sup> Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, Maurice,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52145> (accessed August 19, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1.

aristocrat nor existential challenge for the aesthete but, rather, a practical strategy for queer men. Helen Schugart offers such a pragmatic alternative to the usual aesthetic reading of dandyism: the highly filtered styles of comportment may be read as a survival strategy for those whose inclinations, if made known, would garner social contempt.<sup>72</sup> Applied to Ravel, the concept of social strategy sheds new light on the composer's quirky personality. Ravel's stifled emotion, like Wilde's secret inner flame, was perhaps kept secret for quite a practical reason. The painstaking attention to detail, the nervous retention of impulse, and the virtuosic control of one's signifying body at once show forth the shell of a self but also conceal a queerness within it.

Once arrested, however, Wilde bursts open the dandy's shell with a kind of orgasmic revelation, thrusting forth the performative dimensions of ornamentality. Though Wilde's story may easily be read as a tragic failure that left him destitute—a pariah even—his public transgression may also be seen from a broader vantage as a productive, queer sort of failure, by which he leaps from the closet and brandishes his cane in newly provocative ways. Dandysim, after Wilde, is always-already exposed as an ironic performance of gender and becomes, as Sinfield suggests, something different altogether: Wilde's public sodomy trial marks the turning point in queer self-presentation that hinges between the purse-lipped dandy and the garishly camp performer, who would take the dandy's elegant ruffles and subtle winks to a level of undeniable parody.<sup>73</sup> By extrapolation, then, the drag queen in her loudest gown shows something of the latent potential echoing beneath the dandy's buffed surface. If in a practical

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<sup>72</sup> Helen A. Schugart and Catherine Egle Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>73</sup> Sinfield, 2-3; Fabio Cleto writes that "Wilde's downfall [was] *the* epistemic watershed in the constitutive process of the homosexual-as-type, that process which stabilized the queer sign, and that intervened in the erection of the early twentieth-century epistemic 'nave' of homosexual camp"; Fabio Cleto, "Queering the Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed., Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 93.

sense dandyism aims to conceal queer desire, it nonetheless conveys that desire through the process of concealment and thus participates in the same thrust of desirous action spearheaded by the “New Woman.” Though the “New Woman” and the dandy differ almost diametrically in their orientation toward public exposure, both figures operate through the same kind of knowledge production that employs age-old gender props to re-perform and re-assess the prevailing particle/substance hierarchy.

As Roberts explains, “only a specific set of historical conditions could unleash the disruptive potential of performance,” for such an effective play of gender was only possible “in this very specific scenario, unique to the period,”<sup>74</sup>—when the props of gender were suddenly recognized as such: mere props—and when the lead players found passionate reason to take them up in queer ways. Together, the dandy and the female performer “wear their sexuality with such drama. Both indulge in self-conscious, highly theatrical gender play—the dandy in his sexually ambiguous social polish, the woman in her explicitly staged and painted erotic charms. Placed side by side so often in *fin-de-siècle* culture, these two figures cast a curious light on each other’s performances.”<sup>75</sup> As stock characters of the Parisian stage, the “New Woman” and the dandy do not simply provide us with the cultural backdrop for Ravel’s life and music. Laid out in the language of particularity, they also provide a model of subversive action that may be mapped onto other ornament-laden objects of the *fin de siècle*, Ravel’s self and music, for instance. In contrast to existing discussions of the composer’s aesthetic, one may include Ravel as a subversive actor among Durand, Bernhardt, and Wilde, thus foregrounding ornamentation as a

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<sup>74</sup> Roberts, 15 & 17.

<sup>75</sup> Garelick, 3.



physical, expressive act. Especially in the case of *Ondine*, musical ornament offers a record of Ravel's physicality and the queer desire that gives it motion.

### 3.0 *DRAMATIS PERSONAE, OR QUEERING BY ASSOCIATION*

Placing Ravel among the outspoken glitterati is in some ways anomalous: how could Ravel possibly take part in a gender discourse based on action and bold display when he led so bland a personal life? Given the seeming disparity between Ravel and his active contemporaries, a body-based reading might seem at first irrelevant, misguided, or, impossible. The biographical evidence for Wilde's blatant transgressions, for instance, lacks analogue in Ravel's story; for no specific action of Ravel's has quite the rhetorical bite of a public, queer sex act. This has not deterred interested writers from speculating, however, about a possibly queer sexuality kept unspoken among his closest friends and early biographers. Indeed, Ravel's friends were a dandified and liberal bunch of artists and intellectuals, among whom were the famously queer poets Leon-Paul Fargue and Tristan Klingsor. An extended circle of acquaintances puts Ravel in contact with more transgressive characters such as Andre Gide and Jean Cocteau,<sup>76</sup> in addition to a "wealthy lesbian American expatriate" whose salon guests included "many homosexual notables—Wilde, Proust, Reynaldo Hahn, Ethel Smyth, Poulenc, and Diaghilev—as well as musicians of a more enigmatic sexual character, including Nadia Boulanger, Manuel de Falla," and Ravel himself.<sup>77</sup> Lloyd Whitesell summarizes the mass of speculation surrounding Ravel's "sexual enigma," reassessing the positive and negative evidence that might place Ravel nearer to

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<sup>76</sup> Nichols, 58.

<sup>77</sup> Lloyd Whitesell, "Ravel's Way," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 60.

or farther from an available identity category. While expanding the possibility of Ravel's homosexuality, Whitesell also questions the impetus to claim Ravel for any certain category: whether it is useful, or even just, to circumscribe Ravel. Whatever satisfaction one might get from categorizing the composer "it becomes clear that the unadorned, undifferentiated concept of 'homosexual' is insufficient to describe the variables and personal trajectories that go into the experience of a particular sexual identity."<sup>78</sup> Whitesell's conclusion is an important cautionary note for anyone considering sexuality as a mode of investigation, myself included. The use, here, of placing Ravel as a rather quiet, enigmatic person among a larger group of more and less audacious social dissidents is not to cast another vote for a particular queer category. Instead, it serves to populate the stage on which Ravel will perform for us. His mode of comportment informed by or perhaps absorbed from the glamorous actors around him, Ravel's physicality becomes a more tenable, if distant, object of study.

Because his especially queer circle of friends situates Ravel in the society of disruptive particularity, Ravel's own particularities of movement may be read more confidently in such terms. That is, we see Ravel's body within a discourse of physicality, in which the theatrical or dandified subject takes part in fashioning identity through gendered performance. Such a rhetorical analysis, however, flies against established modes of scholarship, which organize themselves on principles in some ways antithetical to queer investigation. The scholarly language has solidified categories of substance and in-substance, placing in the latter category sites of potentially queer production. As a result, Ravel's non-normative comportment and its artistic correlates in musical ornament fall not simply below score-based analysis in a hierarchy of meaning but, indeed, within an entirely separate and opposing category of unmeaning.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 64

“Imposture” serves as the historically sanctioned organizing principle of Ravel’s aesthetic, and has operated within a hermeneutics of suspicion in prepping Ravel for normative consumption. As early as 1913, Ravel’s lifelong friend and eventual panegyrist Michel Calvocoressi introduced the idea of artificiality as an aesthetic principle.<sup>79</sup> And, within the next fifteen years, biographer and critic Roland-Manuel formulated artifice more precisely as an element central to Ravel and his music,<sup>80</sup> inaugurating a category of investigation that would organize scholarship from thenceforth. Roland-Manuel’s so-called “aesthetics of imposture” accounts for a perceived emotional detachment that unifies man and music under one tidy concept: “Art doesn’t intrude on [Ravel] as it imposed on the romantic composers. It is not, in his eyes the supreme truth, but the most brilliant lie; an amazing imposture.”<sup>81</sup>

From Roland-Manuel’s idea of “imposture” extends the metaphor of the mask, arising by 1939 in writings of Klingsor and Jankelevitch: “Ravel is the friend of *trompe-l’oeil*, false impressions, wooden horses, and booby-traps. Ravel is masked; and that is why the carnival for him does not signify, as with Schumann, an orgy or a confusing witches’ Sabbath, but pseudonyms, the oblique incognito, the *fête galante*.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, this line of criticism raises the broad “critical issue of the full legitimacy of his music [since] the notion of artificiality brings with it the implication of lack of substance and depth, which traditionally is a distinct nonstarter in motivating analytical study.”<sup>83</sup> The related bundle of tropes (of imposture, masquerade,

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<sup>79</sup> Barbara Kelly, “Re-presenting Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetics of Imposture,” in *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music*, ed. Peter Kaminsky (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 45.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 45

<sup>81</sup> Roland-Manuel, 17; translated in Barbara Kelly, “Re-presenting Ravel,” 45.

<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Ravel* (New York: John Calder Publishers, 1959), 115; translation from Huebner, “Ravel’s Poetics,” 25.

<sup>83</sup> Kaminsky, 2.

artificiality, and superficiality) suggests for the biographers a lack of human essence: “Few artists have succeeded in detaching themselves so completely from their art. We may feel that in consequence his music is sometimes lacking in human warmth, and that there is even something glacial in the very perfection of his craftsmanship.”<sup>84</sup> Such detachment serves at once as a marker of human absence in addition to an affirmation of Ravel’s personal presence: It was Ravel’s own “underlying stance of detachment [which] enabled him to create exquisite, impeccable surfaces and inscrutable, evasive aesthetic spaces.”<sup>85</sup> To whatever extent his musical aesthetic seems to align with his person, Ravel’s “surface perfection” still becomes, for many, “a denial of depth—an impoverishment.”<sup>86</sup> And that perceived hollowness is in large part the reason Ravel “is thought to fall short of the canonic.”<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, scholarship which does not prejudge the music to be fruitless is often guilty of another harmful presumption: that the analytical pith of the music is hidden behind the silly facades Ravel has erected, and that such pith must be uncovered by traditional musicological means. Such a suspicious mode of investigation renders Ravel legible within established traditions, and thus smoothes over the composer’s queerness. Ravel’s awkward *pudeur*, along with its perceived equivalent in the music, is circumscribed in normative discourse

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<sup>84</sup>Rollo H. Myers, *Ravel: Life and Works* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 215.

<sup>85</sup> Whitesell, “Ravel’s Way,” 72.

<sup>86</sup> Stephen Huebner, “Ravel’s Perfection,” in *Ravel Studies*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>87</sup> Roger Nichols, “Ravel and the Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 240; One result of Ravel’s lack of consumability seems to be the splintered opinions that surfaced just after his death, about how he might fit into a narrative of French music or, more broadly, Western art: “In a number of these assessments,” Barbara Kelly explains, “Ravel’s contribution is regarded as supplementary to the more overwhelming impact of Debussy,” to whom subsequent prominent French composers trace their lineage (“Re-presenting Ravel,” 52).

as a mere superficiality: “If an artist does not employ recognizable modes of human expression,” the faulty logic seems to say, “he must be hiding some more traditionally heartfelt sentiment.” Or: “If his presentation is so disingenuous, we must find a core of normality that will qualify Ravel for a more genuine position in the canon.” As Huebner explains, the rhetoric of artifice and masks planted so early on “has encouraged some to detect a substratum of genuine emotion in his work and to identify decoys that deflect the listener from this inner world.”<sup>88</sup> The assumption of a hidden sincerity insists on a binary understanding of Ravel’s person, privileging substance over particle, and ignoring queerness as a glittery pretense.

It is thus unsurprising that musical investigations have not focused on Ravel’s queer physicality, for the traditional categories of scholarship resist reading queerness as anything beyond a resignation from normative discourse. According to one biographer at least, Ravel suffered from a sort of dandified immaturity that was illegible on purpose—a real attempt “to appear mysterious and misunderstood.”<sup>89</sup> Even today, to do analysis of Ravel’s music is, as Kaminsky puts it, to “peer behind the mask.”<sup>90</sup> Whatever the scholarly intent, such language (taken without qualification)<sup>91</sup> insists that Ravel’s self-presentation prevents our knowing him: that one must read behind the dandy’s façade to get at the real (or “normative”) person. Such readings at once place inordinate value in the traditional signifiers of personhood, dismiss bodily

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<sup>88</sup> Steven Huebner, “Ravel’s Poetics: Literary Currents, Classical Takes,” in *Unmasking Ravel*, ed. Peter Kaminsky (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 25.

<sup>89</sup> Seroff, 64.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Kaminsky, “Vocal Music and the Lures of Exoticism and Irony,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 187.

<sup>91</sup> Kaminsky’s recent collection of essays titled *Unmasking Ravel* invokes the traditional language but succeeds at resituating it, so that the tropes are actually brought into question, rather than reinforced. In fact, Kaminsky’s introduction provides a taxonomy of the categories that have shaped the scholarship.

evidence as unequivocal, and reinscribe Ravel within a narrow category of anal-retentive androgynes. In other words, reading Ravel's *sangfroid* as something to "get past" reifies an imagined distance between scholar and object by ignoring the veritable body of evidence in front of our faces. In order to work against this current of normative logos, one must purposely foreground Ravel's delicate and ornamental mode of comportment as itself a worthy object of investigation.

If scholarship has traditionally equated Ravel's body with a decorative shell, serving only to hide the "substantive" secrets of his music, I take his dandified body to be the goal. As part of a performing community, in which one's self *per se* was the supreme artistic medium, Ravel may be reconsidered as a being whose movement in the world was essentially connected to his movement at the piano. Investigated in light of the active community he belonged to, Ravel's body and his art may be seen in a reciprocal state of creation not unlike those of his literary and dramatic contemporaries. Indeed, the above collusion of Bernhardt, Durand, and Wilde spills over with the same kind of theatrical duality: art and life in imitation of one another. For Sarah Bernhardt, role assumption was both a professional skill and a personal, creative act that took place behind as well as before the proscenium arch. And Wilde's story relates a veritable explosion of the same arch, after which the Shakespearean aphorism rang truer than ever: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." The public trial revealed social roles to be theatrical ones as well, crafted not so differently from Wilde's literary characters. What would it mean, however, to ask such questions of a composer, whose legacy comprises musical texts that are traditionally celebrated as frozen documents, relegated to a level of theory several strata above the earthbound discourses that speak through bodily friction? Or how might

an artistic product such as music, which does not seem to inhere in any representation of the human body, extend as an arm of real, desirous action?

By carrying this language of disruptive action into the realm of music, one asks the same basic question that haunts Ravel's biographers: "How to connect man and music?"<sup>92</sup> Looming similarly over more recent scholarship, the same question has encouraged scholars to illuminate Ravel's person through queer readings of the music. Michael Puri, for instance, deepens our understanding of Ravel's so-called sexual enigma by offering an allegorical reading of *Daphnis and Chloe*, invoking sublimation "explicitly as a psychoanalytic concept that can be applied directly to the behavior of the characters in the ballet."<sup>93</sup> Concerning non-dramatic works, Whitesell reads musical form and syntax as symbolic of Ravel's erotic desire. Asserting that "queer subjectivity can have far-reaching consequences for one's cognitive and creative orientation," he examines semantic markers of queerness. In the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, for example, Whitesell explains how "Ravel's mischievous, negligent handling of voice-leading syntax imbues the very musical fabric with ironic desire."<sup>94</sup> Others have cast Ravel himself as a character, thinly veiled, within his programmatic music: the dandified peacock of *Histoires naturelles*<sup>95</sup> or the coquettish *indifferent* from *Shéhérazade*.<sup>96</sup> Such scholarship does the important work of revealing symbolic connections between Ravel and his compositions and

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<sup>92</sup> For instance, according to Myers, "the main task of the biographer is clearly to stress as far as possible the connexion between the 'inner' life of the artist, with all its secret tensions, aspirations, and deceptions, and its outward projection as revealed in his works" (p. 9).

<sup>93</sup> Michael Puri, "Dandy Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Portraiture in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* (1909-1912)," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 321.

<sup>94</sup> Whitesell, "Erotic Ambiguity," 88.

<sup>95</sup> As suggested by Theo Hirsbrunner, *Maurice Ravel: Sein Leben, sein Werk* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1989), 128; cited in Puri, "Dandy Interrupted," 319 n 7.

<sup>96</sup> As suggested by Emile Vuillermoz, 65; cited in Whitesell, "Erotic Ambiguity," 74.



imbricating him among other cultural actors whose work forms larger subversive discourses, especially those of gender and sexuality.

Nevertheless, the existing literature presumes an impossible distance between Ravel's self and his music by confining musical-personal connections to the realm of allegory, sublimation, or just metaphor. By contrast, my own staging of the drama (populated by the likes of Bernhardt, Durand, and Wilde), evinces a vacuum within existing scholarship; among these active bodies who perform their desire in real time and space—the seductive *belle*, the androgynous actress, the convicted sodomite—one yearns to account for a physical existence of Ravel, to find within the music a carnality that will, at last, let us know him. Indeed, Puri and Whitesell do something close to this when interpolating desire onto Ravel's humdrum sexual life and, thereby, pointing in the direction of a passionate, bodily musicology. Yet these studies lack an immediacy that allows the scholarship of Mary Louise Roberts to literally “matter.” The compelling power of Roberts' brand of scholarship lies not in the complexities of artistic sublimation and allegory but, rather, in the imminence of raw action, as the movement of bodies gives voice to desire. Although inductive readings open the doors of metaphoric possibility, there is something satisfying in a humbler knowledge of the artist's worldly state and the sites of friction that arranged his or her material world. Knowledge of the banal brings the historical subject to life, as a being who contended with the very laws of physics that today allow one to pick up a pencil, to crash a car, and to make love. Scholarship (and creative life in general) does seem driven by this very aim to gaining more complete knowledge of other beings, syncretizing disparate subjectivities, or expanding one's ego through identification with others' experience. Sharing such an impetus to “know” Ravel on an intimate, even carnal, level, we now turn to a

newly spotlighted man: his costume, his pose, his expressive fingers. Front and center, Ravel may be seen to play his own transgressive, albeit subtle, role in a drama of flesh and blood.

#### 4.0 LIGHTS, CAMERA, MOTION !

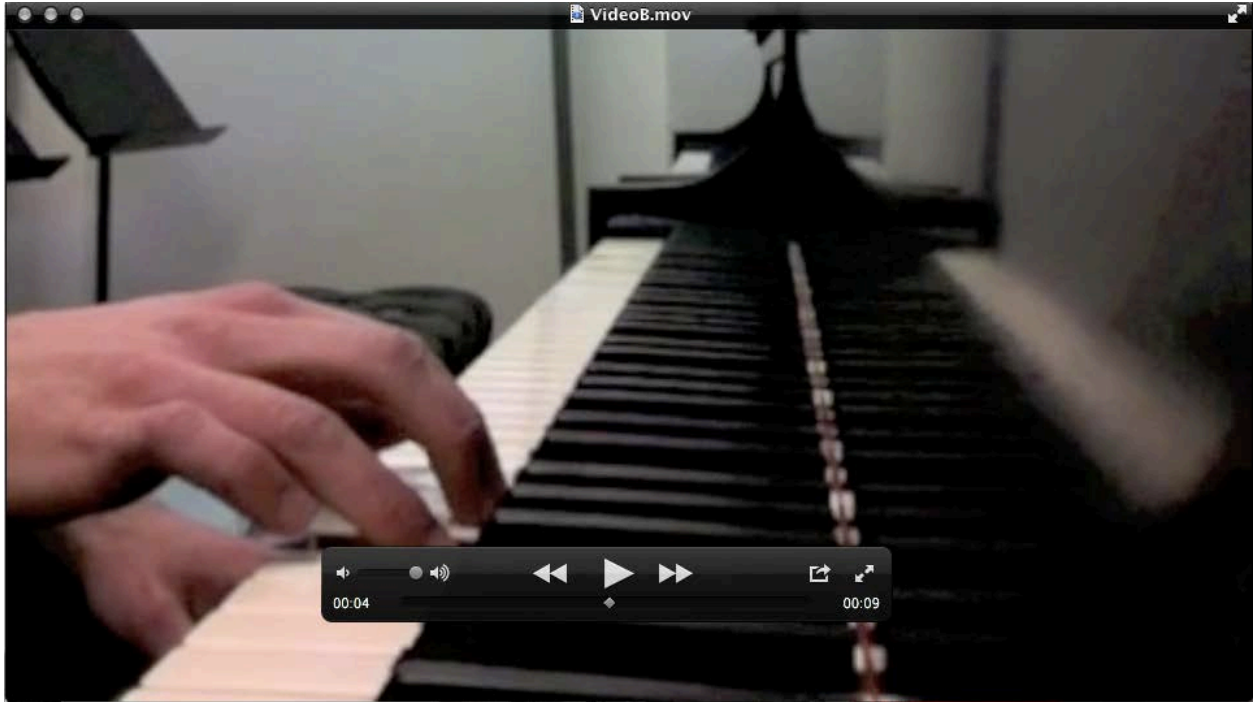
As far as scholarship expresses a basic desire for subjective intimacy, my project does not reform past musicological efforts but builds upon them. Retaining the impulse to illuminate Ravel's subjectivity through his composition, I aim to literalize the connection between man and music. Leong and Korevaar provide a basis for such a literal approach to Ravel's piano music. Looking for ways in which "the tactile dimension influences and sometimes determines aspects of musical structure,"<sup>97</sup> the two authors, a performer/theorist duo, show manual motion to be a source of compositional invention that can be distilled from both small- and large-scale musical structures. The opening figure of *Jeux d'eau* provides one such example, they explain, where the opening figure expands in complexity and register while maintaining a contour shaped by the simple rocking motion of the right hand.<sup>98</sup> Leong and Korevaar also analyze *Scarbo*, in terms of the basic manual motions which organize the music and comprise a "physical palette" from which the composer draws;<sup>99</sup> that is, simple hand movements are located as potential units of organization which germinate and interbreed to give form to the music. *Scarbo*'s opening pair of

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<sup>97</sup> Daphne Leong and David Korevaar, "Repetition as Music Motion in Ravel's Piano Writing," in *Unmasking Ravel*, ed. Peter Kaminsky (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 111-12; **Video B** shows the first twenty measures of *Jeux d'eau*, played through once, then repeated in slow motion. The hyperextension of the right-hand digits in this excerpt exemplifies the sort of unorthodox technique which helps the hand of ordinary size execute such passages; see below, pp. 50-6.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 125.



**Video B: *Jeux d'eau*, dancelike motion and right-hand extension, mm. 1-20.**

musical figures, for instance, utilize two basic types of physical motion, one involving mechanistic, piston-like movement of the digits and the other involving a dance-like supination of the wrist and arm. Leong and Korevaar show how the two figures “transform into four themes and demonstrate how these themes unfold in three formal sections.”<sup>100</sup> Here, the performer’s movement is more than the means to a sonic end but, rather, becomes as essential as its resulting sound:

We have argued that the pianist’s physical gestures form an intrinsic part of these crucial figures and units... These gestures not only help to define and characterize units, but act in fact as the real “movers” in the animation and choreography of these units.<sup>101</sup>

The promotion of movement as a worthwhile object of analysis reveals a choreographic logic behind the composition, providing an alternative to, or extension of, the more usual

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 137.

musicological tools based on theory and semiotics. The score becomes an index by which Ravel's characteristic movements can be traced and situated within a larger social performance of gender for both composer and instrumentalist.

The music-body connection, so practically forged by Leong and Korevaar, is strengthened by Ravel's investment in a uniquely physical pianism. That is, the repertoire's idiomatic and virtuosic nature lends practical credibility to a body-based analysis.<sup>102</sup> As Arbie Orenstein explains, "the piano is the privileged instrument in Ravel's art, not only because he was a pianist and composed at the keyboard, but because virtually all of the fresh trends in his style first appear in the piano music."<sup>103</sup> Orenstein's blanket statement perhaps corroborates the special subjective experience of pianists who, at one point or another, lost their Ravelian virginity: "It falls so efficiently under the hands!" The ease of play is no wonder, however, since this music was conceived *through* a set of hands. One biographer marvels at the lack of "any visible traces on [Ravel's] desk of any manuscript paper, pens, or pencils. It was, as Roland-Manuel observed, as if by depressing the keys of his piano he set in motion, by invisible means, the machinery which produced the printed page, eliminating all intermediate stages."<sup>104</sup>

Ravel's body-based process places his work as the climax in a French keyboard pedigree building on Scarlatti, Couperin, Liszt, Chopin, and Saint-Saens.<sup>105</sup> The term "virtuosi" serves as an apt category for Ravel and other members of the tradition not simply because their works demand a certain degree of technical facility but, also, because their compositional process more

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<sup>102</sup> Howat describes the sort of bodily signature conveyed through keyboard music more generally: "Even if no two pianists ever fit themselves identically to the same piece, an enjoyable secret of pianism lies in sensing and flexibly adjusting to the composer's own natural ways of moving," (*French Piano Music*, p. 294).

<sup>103</sup> Leong and Korevaar, 138 n 2.

<sup>104</sup> Myers, 213.

<sup>105</sup> Leong and Korevaar, 141 n 44.

or less privileges the shape and motions of the body. Le Guin traces the etymology of musical “virtue” to Ancient, Aristotelian formulations of the term, in which a person’s identity intertwines with the daily processes of habituated thought and motion.<sup>106</sup> For Aristotle, a person was not *deemed* virtuous out of righteous intent or desire but, rather, *achieved* virtue through the consistent and habitual performance of virtuous actions; so action was taken to be a guiding force not only in expressing but also in shaping and acquiring identity.<sup>107</sup> Though popular use of “virtuosity” today seems to connote little more than technical acrobatics, the roots of the term suggest a subtler meaning that emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between subjective identity and its outward manifestations. Le Guin summarizes virtuosity as “the epitome of unity between inner impulse and outer execution: performative perfection.”<sup>108</sup> As far as the fashioned art object (or the piano piece) arises from the practiced motions of an artist’s body, it may be seen to record a certain subjective state. The musical score takes shape from the physical habits, abilities, and constraints of the individual and, for us, becomes more than a translation of the cognitive process by which Ravel composed—more than a progression of musical logic to be deciphered as sublimated desire or accidental autobiography. In a simpler (even bathetic) sense, the piano literature becomes a record of the habituated motions that Ravel’s body went through when composing. As far as Ravel’s writing inheres in such a physicality, it requires no logical leap to

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<sup>106</sup> Le Guin explains the tautological, “bootstrap” quality of Aristotle’s virtue, as it demonstrates a “keen attunement to the profound intrication of human nature, be it virtuous or lyre-playing, with performance. Virtue is found in, and only in, its continued performance,” (p. 135).

<sup>107</sup> Sherman explains that “habituation is not a mindless drill, but a cognitive shaping of desires through perception, belief, and intention. These capacities are involved in acting *from* character, and, to a different extent and degree, in *acquiring* character”; Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7, original emphasis.

<sup>108</sup> Le Guin, 5.

fuse social and artistic action as they derive from the selfsame organism, with all its anxieties, hopes, and mannerisms. Because of its virtuosic nature, Ravel's music contains some quite literal trace of his personal identity.

Seeing Ravel's music in this way as an outgrowth of his social body allows for new scholarly analyses, especially since, as we have seen, the body took on such rhetorical power in Parisian artistic circles. The sorts of gender subversion performed by the "New Woman" and the dandy thus find more than allegorical representation in the music's program<sup>109</sup> and more than metaphoric likeness in queer voice leading.<sup>110</sup> But, especially in the piano works, subversive action finds direct expression as a product of Ravel's dandified body; queerness needs no representation, because it is innately present in his virtuosic process of composition. Self-evident as it may sound, the essential connection between the body and its products collapses that distance cursed by Myers and the other biographers. With the ability to know Ravel in such an immediate sense, the instrumentalist takes an ironic shortcut, bypassing the biographer's dilemma and coming closer to Ravel than any book-bound musicologist. Ravel's unique brand of pianism fortuitously grants us access to the realm of materiality, locating a hidden joint between man and music and bringing one ever closer to that carnal goal implicit in creative scholarship.

I frame the discussion here with such a fleshy vocabulary not in attempt to affect a racy tone but, rather, to underscore a certain kind of materiality, in which purposely configured matter is taken to be intimately and necessarily impressed by human desire and its bodily vessel. If reading a musical score in this way as a "manipulated" substance promises to expose something

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<sup>109</sup> See Puri, "Dandy, Interrupted."

<sup>110</sup> See Whitesell, "Erotic Ambiguity."

of the “manipulator,” such a reading also seems beyond the scope of traditional musicological methods. By way of interdisciplinary lever, the decadent drawing of Aubrey Beardsley offers a helpful instance of this blending of art and artist: Beardsley’s personal dandy aesthetic reaches beyond metaphoric signification to pervade the artwork physically. While his best-known ink drawings are usefully analyzed in terms of classical balance and linear simplicity, they also activate the seemingly opposed categories of profuse ornament and lushness characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence.<sup>111</sup> The drawing *Et in Arcadia Ego* combines a naturalistic Rococo scene with a medieval *mille-fleur* carpet, setting the scene for a parody of Poussin’s seventeenth-century “Les bergers d’Arcadie.”<sup>112</sup> Reflecting the Art Nouveau love of repetitive, organic shapes, the carpet teems with flowering plants that rise above the miniaturist grass blades toward the overhanging tree, itself dotted with impossibly small white specs. One may imagine Beardsley’s virtuosic process—the fineness of motion required of the pen’s tip and the fingers that, with even finer motion, direct it. Framed on three sides by the foliage, Beardsley’s “virtual caricature of the urban, artificial dandy” tiptoes with a “youthful jauntiness, unruffled confidence, and pretentious elegance.”<sup>113</sup> Happening upon the classic *momento mori* etched into a tomb (“Even in Arcadia, there am I”) the dandy “is confronted with the ironic incongruity that his highly controlled and protective life of stylized artifice must necessarily yield to the ravages of death just as surely as does the most careless and prosaically vulgar life.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Colin White, “Thomas Mackenzie and the Beardsley Legacy,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 7 (1998): 9.

<sup>112</sup> See **Image 2**.

<sup>113</sup> Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 234.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.





**Image 2: Aubrey Beardsley, *Et in Arcadia Ego*<sup>115</sup>**

Yet the irony is made more poignant by meta-reference to the artist. Himself a distillation of Baudelaire’s prototype, Beardsley “was all too happy to reinforce” connections between his personal aesthetic and the exaggerated dandies who populate his drawings.<sup>116</sup> *Et in Arcadia Ego* employs such unabashed self-reference. The “unusually diminutive cane,”<sup>117</sup> more like a knitting needle, points toward virtuosically striped pants, as if to link the figure’s prim

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<sup>115</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, AllPaintings, <http://www.allpaintings.org/v/Art+Nouveau/Aubrey+Beardsley/Aubrey+Beardsley+-+Et+in+Arcadia+Ego.jpg.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35; see also Brian Reade, *Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Studio Vista, 1966), 14.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

grasp with that of Beardsley's own hand. So the work does not simply depict a delicate aesthete, decked in ruffles and spatted shoes—and surrounded by natural finery that magnifies an already sufficient daintiness. The work's physical form, out of which the viewer discerns semantic content, is itself the product of such a dandified individual. The dandy's essence is invoked simultaneously by discernable image and by the style with which that image is rendered. In other words, the picture gains meaning by vibrating between the boundaries of form and content, surface and substance. The figure's hand, held with studied poise, is the very hand that rendered the lush carpet on which he stands; and the fine-tipped cane, accentuating an angled wrist, is the very instrument that recorded the artist's delicate modulation. By fusing semantic content with its depicted form, Beardsley clarifies the connection between art and artist or, more generally, between a thing made and its maker. Beardsley paints himself as the explicit and implicit subject of the picture: invoking the concept "dandy" not only as an identity category embodied by the suited figure, but also as an orientation to the world, or a style of being, characterized by the frivolous and particularized motion recorded through his pen's ink. *Et in Arcadia Ego* shows art and artist to be co-constitutive of one another—each one shaped and characterized by worldly action. In short, Beardsley's manual motion not only fashions the picture into a dandified object, but it also fashions Beardsley into a dandified subject. The tip of Beardsley's pen is a kind of ontological fulcrum, its motion rendering on both sides a dandy.

The visual art object may thus be seen to inscribe movement into a more static, traceable format, revealing the process by which a body impresses itself upon its work. Perceived in such visual terms as an impression of the artist's body, the musical score too acquires an aesthetic quality appreciable to the eyes, which see, at once, inscription of and prescription for the physical performance of the music. Such language repositions the score vis-à-vis the scholar, so

that the notes and their patterns do not themselves comprise historical substance but, instead, relate a specific tale of bodily motion. Especially as the score acquires a function secondary to the motions which originate it, it becomes a Peircean sign of the indexical sort, that is, a sign defined by contiguity with its referent.<sup>118</sup> Classically exemplified by the bullet hole or the footprint, the indexical image “holds an existential relationship to its object.”<sup>119</sup> A swarm of noteheads on the score of *Ondine* is like an imprint of Ravel’s hands, which fall on the keyboard in unique ways and thus privilege certain types of motion. Rather than simply encoding a metaphor through music theory, Ravel’s score prescribes a formula for the evocation of the composer’s body and, in veritable choreography, allows the performer to approximate original movement as recorded by the technical requirements of the fingers, the hands, and the wrists—these requirements being laid out across the staves in a sprinkling of noteheads. Viewed thus as a pointalist map, *Ondine* presents itself as a static visual index to a more fluid act.

Scholarship has not ignored such correlations between Ravel’s pianistic style and his body. For instance, the shape of his hands, and particularly his spatulate, squarish thumbs, leave their mark in the form of double glissandi (in *Alborada del Gracioso*)<sup>120</sup> and of figurations in which the thumb is required to stretch across two keys at once (in *Jeux d’eau* and *Scarbo*). Ravel’s strange thumbs may provide clever, anecdotal material for the biographer, but more important to a culture-steeped analysis of gender performance, however, are bodily correlations of a broader sort. By considering such short, isolatable figures as parts of a more general temperament or character, one might distill Ravel’s style: as a demonstrative range of hand and

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<sup>118</sup> David Lidov, *Elements of Semiotics* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1999), 93.

<sup>119</sup> Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, eds., *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Mawhaw New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 16.

<sup>120</sup> See Nichols, *Ravel*, 55.

wrist movements working to negotiate between accompaniment and melody amid rhythmically dense textures. Although this style characterizes much of his oeuvre, *Ondine* is a rich example, in which his transcendental technique is particularly evident,<sup>121</sup> and in which the music's program highlights the symbolic import of the style.

While all piano literature depends on digital motion (by definition "fine"), Ravel's style seems to cite that fineness in a pronounced or even hyperbolic way. The intense rhythmic density in *Ondine* begins at the baseline speed of the 32nd note and dips below that speed for only eight of the piece's 91 measures. The trembling figure at the opening exemplifies Ravel's "predilection for rigidly patterned movement"<sup>122</sup> and gives way to more diffuse expressions of a similar nervous energy throughout the piece, for instance, in mm. 14 and 57. Among these and the various other figures that maintain *Ondine*'s rhythmic density, the speed of key depression encourages a high, relaxed wrist and facile movement of the digits. Especially for pianists with more or less small hands, however, executing certain flourishes requires a splayed hand and sometimes hyper-extended fingers.<sup>123</sup> The pointalist energy behind these types of motion pervades the work and preoccupies itself with miniaturist interest in local, frenetic articulation.<sup>124</sup>

As one zooms out from Ravel's busy surfaces, larger, discernible objects come into view: the musical lines of *Ondine*'s song. Already contending with ornamental figures in the accompaniment, the hands must also give voice to the slower moving melodic line. Although

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<sup>121</sup> Nancy Bricard, ed., *Ravel: Gaspard de la Nuit*, forward (New York: Alfred, 1987), 9.

<sup>122</sup> Kelly, "Ravel, Maurice."

<sup>123</sup> E.g., see right hand pinky extension in mm. 75-79, **Video A**, 4:48-5:03; see also **Video B**: *Jeux d'eau*'s opening figure requires of the pianist (especially one of average-sized hands) several measures of unorthodox finger extensions, in which the joints bend outward away from the palm.

<sup>124</sup> Ravel's favorite Erard brand of piano, which facilitated "lightly repeated notes and sophisticated glissandos," would have complemented the busy, joint-based motion prescribed by the score (Howat, "Ravel," 77-8).

melody and accompaniment are sometimes separable by hands, they usually fall more ambiguously within or around one another, so that the left hand will complete a pattern begun by the right, as in m. 30 and, vice-versa, in m. 73. When the melody falls amid such volatile accompaniment, it too is tossed between the hands. *Ondine* is full of those passages so common in the keyboard works, “where pianists have to prepare a careful balletic scenario for each hand if they are not to end up like Alice’s ball of wool.”<sup>125</sup> In mm. 38-40, the hands juggle melodic responsibility while also handling two accompanimental figurations, one of which twice surges up and down across the texture’s entire compass [**Figure 5**].

Such scenarios often involve a repeated, rhythmic crossing of the hands, so that one’s entire body moves in a kind of dancelike sympathy, for instance, in mm. 71-2. Such scenarios may also require one hand to play on top of or underneath another, as with the opening statement of the melody. In order to take a deeper position in the key bed, the upper hand assumes a more pointed character, playing with a bent wrist and touching the keys with the very tips of the fingers [**Video A**, 0:40-1:00]. While directing the hands in such stylized poses, the texture also prevents any one pose from lingering. In tandem with the volatile musical figures, the hands pass constantly across registers, above and below—sometimes within—one another’s space. The accompaniment’s quick passage from the upper to lower register in mm. 45-46 leads the right hand underneath the left, which must arch upward in an elegant bend.<sup>126</sup> The exhibited degree of such elegance is ultimately determined by the pianist; one could purposely minimize

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<sup>125</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 75; Howat also discusses Ravel’s tricky hand patterns; however, he attributes them not to a unique body logic as I do but, rather, to Ravel’s mediation of pre-conceived orchestral textures through savvy manual experimentation (*French Piano Music*, 299).

<sup>126</sup> See **Figure 6**.

wrist flexion by keeping the hands as close as possible or even by employing a less-intuitive fingering. One may conversely emphasize wrist flexion in addition to other, specifically digital effects, as does pianist Ivo Pogorelich, going beyond emphasis and verging at times on the theatrical.<sup>127</sup> To whatever extent a pianist’s style accentuates it, manual display is built-into



Figure 5: *Ondine*, juggling melodic and accompanimental figures, mm. 38-40<sup>128</sup>



Figure 6: *Ondine*, left hand upward arch, m. 44<sup>129</sup>

<sup>127</sup> See Pogorelich’s performance; Ivo Pogorelich, “Ivo Pogorelich - Ravel Gaspard de la nuit - Ondine - part 1 of 3,” YouTube video, from a London performance in 1983, posted by “Goranowitsch,” January 28, 2010, <http://youtu.be/dzvOPy3-58>.

<sup>128</sup> See **Video A**, 2:10-2:20.

<sup>129</sup> See **Video A**, 2:35-2:40.



**Image 3: Ravel at the piano, 1912<sup>130</sup>**

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<sup>130</sup> Roland-Manuel, "Maurice Ravel au piano," 11x8 cm, 1912, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8423950j/f1.item>.

Ravel's score. The result is a choreography, in which supple wrists and flexible fingers seem to be dancing to, rather than creating, the music. Coupled with *Ondine*'s pointalist rhythms, the versatility of hand positions renders the fingertip more clearly a fulcrum, about which the proximal joints of the hand, wrist, and arm shift and pose in attractive ways.

From a pedagogical point of view, the musical structures of *Ondine* encourage a set of anatomical positions not traditionally celebrated as the most technically sound. Pianists may recall from their primer years a basic physical logic, orally transmitted from teacher to student: power emanates from the body's core, whence the arms, forearms, hands, and fingers derive the weight used to depress the keys. One never *reaches* for a key, as if driven by those "miserable, skinny little fingertips," one pedagogue writes.<sup>131</sup> But to achieve the hale and hardy sound associated with the "Teutonic beef" of a Beethoven concerto, one must harness the deeper, more proximal parts of the body.<sup>132</sup> Likewise talked about in terms of vigor, substance, and naturalness, the shape of the hand helps facilitate this type of tone production: "If the wrist 'breaks', the forces coming down through the arm cannot be transmitted...into the key. Instead they shear off at an angle, their effect nullified."<sup>133</sup> Applying such logic of core virility to *Ondine* would seem antithetical to the piece's makeup, perhaps bludgeoning its most ethereal moments. The banging chords of a Beethoven concerto effervesce under the hands of Ravel and suggest a fluttery technique specially fitted to a broken wrist and a splayed hand.<sup>134</sup> Picking up

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<sup>131</sup> Alan Fraser, *The Craft of Piano Playing* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow, 2011), 128.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 128 and 158.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-92.

<sup>134</sup> As we shall see in **Section 5** below, the opposition between proximal and distal (or virile and effeminate) types of movement is not limited by time period or discipline. That is, Beethoven did not have to wait until the turn of the twentieth century to meet an apt foil for his massive style but, rather, found the binarism firmly in place already, each pole waiting for its latest prototype. As formulations of Beethoven's genius took shape in the



the score for the first time, then, a pianist ought not imagine a German shot-putter but a French dandy, who inspects his fingernails with consummate delicacy.<sup>135</sup>

Though we cannot literally watch Ravel at his instrument, extant photographs do show a rather high wrist and hyper-extended fingers, both of which seem to taunt popular knowledge of good, healthy pianism.<sup>136</sup> In **Section 5**, approaching Ravel's art from this direction (of disruption not continuity; queerness not normativity) will give cultural weight to his anatomical repertoire. Indeed, as the argument stands, Ravel's stylistic catalogue is merely descriptive of physical positions in space and, as such, falls by default as a puzzle piece within the history of virtuosic pianism.<sup>137</sup> Becoming yet another set of emulations in the story of Western masterworks, Ravel's motion *per se* does little to thicken the context within which we might provide a queer reading of the music. But taking full advantage of our fortuitous knowledge of Ravel's body

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nineteenth century, the composer Johann Hummel served as a handy antipode, whose style of "virtuoso embroidery" lacked the weight with which Beethoven's music hurtled into canonic orbit (Sachs). Using language similar to that describing Ravel's aesthetic, Scottish music critic George Hogarth, for example, explains how Hummel's "rapid and brilliant, yet delicate and finished, execution" reminds us of Mozart but fails to carry us away "with that impetuous force which belongs to the style of Beethoven" (Hogarth, p. 189). And Czerny, in defense of Beethoven, scoffs that Hummel's playing "was as monotonous as a barrel-organ [and that] he held his fingers like a spider" (Kroll, pp. 19-20); Joel Sachs, "Hummel, Johann Nepomuk," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13548> (accessed November 18, 2012); George Hogarth, *Musical History, Biography, and Criticism* (London: John W. Parker, 1838); Mark Kroll, *Johann Nepomuk Hummel: A Musician's Life and World* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

<sup>135</sup> One of the more expressive hand-splays occurs after the ametrical upbeat to m. 79, as the right hand swings up and outward in accommodation of the approaching left hand underneath; see **Video A**, 5:02.

<sup>136</sup> See **Image 3**; Ravel's high wrist position and splayed fingers are also evident in a photograph taken the same year with choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, available [here](http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/PG7828/choreographer-nijinsky-and-composer-ravel-sitting-at): "Choreographer Nijinsky and Composer Ravel Sitting at Piano," 1912, Bettman/Corbis, <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/PG7828/choreographer-nijinsky-and-composer-ravel-sitting-at>.

<sup>137</sup> For instance, see Stuckenschmidt, 51-52.

would require us to freight motion, to weigh it down, to give it the cultural thrust of gesture. One might ask, for instance, why Ravel's body found such a fitting outlet in this special sort of manuality? And what more broadly social meanings are implied by such manuality? While scholars have aptly summarized Ravel's pianistic motion as dance-like and mechanistic,<sup>138</sup> such traits are less useful for an investigation of gender because they align more readily with Ravelian tropes of machinery, bibelots, Spanishness, and technical ostentation. The more useful category will prove to be one of particularity and the performance thereof.

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<sup>138</sup> For example, see Leong and Korevaar, 115-16.

## 5.0 JAZZ FINGERS AND THE LIMP WRIST: A HISTORY

*Ondine*'s motion activates particularity in Schor's sense of the term, dovetailing not only with the seductive nymph in the program but, also, with the extra-diegetic world of the composer and his aesthete audience. Particularity serves as a broad category, encompassing the instrumentalist's fingers as much as his elegant bow and his carefully shaped moustache, so that, in this sense, *Ondine* becomes a bodily product not qualitatively different from the other, non-musical objects Ravel manipulated. Indeed, Ravel's "elegant, supremely legible" handwriting, with its fantastically assertive J's,<sup>139</sup> took shape from the same hand that impressed *Ondine*'s sinuous melody. Following this body-logic, artistic actions we tend to associate with a more cerebral or inspired energy are undifferentiated from the motions of everyday life: the tying of his "showy" bowties, the folding of his monogrammed hanky, the twisting of his whiskers, and the primping of his "frilly shirts."<sup>140</sup> As far as Ravel's musical aesthetic exists contiguously with his social aesthetic (indeed, they are inseparable as products of the same corporal mechanism), both may be seen to take part in an age-old discourse of particularity. More specifically, Ravel's style of motion activates three strands within the discourse: creativity, deception, and the feminine. The nexus of these different strands forms not a tidy web but, rather, a tangled bundle of symbols whose connections may be traced via etymology. Though spread throughout history, the

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<sup>139</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 351.

<sup>140</sup> Larner, 54; see **Image 1**.

multifarious citations of particularity below make a case for their current relevance only because of the ease with which one can conjure their image in the modern mind. In this way, raising Ravel's pianism as an exemplar of queer movement does not simply thicken the context through which an historian might imagine *fin-de-siècle* Paris but, more immediately, it shows the music to be a vehicle through which a long-pejorated queerness can be cited still today and (one could hope) reworked.

Although Schor focuses on particularity as it is represented in works of visual art and literature, one may easily trace a parallel story of the motion which fashioned those particularized artworks. Such motion operates through the body's finest, most pointed parts. The hands indeed may grab, tug, clasp onto, and shove matter, transferring the entire body's weight to effect substantial changes in the world. Yet, by contrast, its fingers arrange matter at the level of detail, working at the surface of objects to create more subtle change. Offering an unparalleled fineness of muscular coordination, the fingers take action of a different nature, the kind that is especially human in its capacity to weave from individual threads something that before did not exist. Accordingly, the sort of "doing" done by manual motion doubles its meaning in Latin as also "making."<sup>141</sup> The ability of the human hand to fashion new objects—to weave cloth or to knead bread—enacts the species' prized ability to create. Arising along with a technological leap during the Upper Paleolithic age some 40,000 years ago, this proud distinction finds expression through fossilized remains of the hunter-gatherers, whose once "simple stone tools" became sharper, in "awls, pins, and various chisel-like burins."<sup>142</sup> Such objects extend the ability of the digits and work, by their very shape, at a scope smaller than previous tools.

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<sup>141</sup> "Facere": to do or to make

<sup>142</sup> Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 42.

Whereas a club works on an entire object—changing “bison” to “food”—a paint-soaked brush works on the surface of an object—changing “rock” to “painted rock.”<sup>143</sup> Grammatically speaking, fine motion works adjectively rather than nominally: modifying a surface, attaching decoration, or arranging matter on a local level. The human ability to manipulate detail made possible a sort of creative experience that extended beyond blunt practicality, and toward the refined practice of abstract signification. Indeed, the bludgeoned bison became more than a food but, now, a concept rendered in miniature on the cave wall. The human hand inheres in this ability for mimetic representation, and the fingers in particular (shown as the poignant fulcrum between Adam and God on the Sistine Chapel ceiling) are the tools by which we hone those finest of skills, or the fine “arts.”<sup>144</sup> Manual facility<sup>145</sup> in this sense is the means by which we mimic the first and ultimate act of Godly creation. Using *logos* (the word, concept, or symbol), we are capable of re-presenting the world unto itself, through pen-and-ink, through essay, or through musical composition. Whatever the chosen stylus, creativity is enacted with the delicacy of our phalanges.

But the fashioned nature of the fine arts also gives them an aura of something not quite natural, something mediated by an interested agent. As far as the arts re-present rather than simply present, it is no surprise that particularized acts of “doing,”<sup>146</sup> have an etymological sibling in the word “fiction” and its negative-tinged relatives (fictive, facetious, factious, fickle,

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<sup>143</sup> The cave painters at Lascaux likely used brushes or sponge-like objects to paint their figures; Paul G. Bahn, “Lascaux,” *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T049431> (accessed August 20, 2012).

<sup>144</sup> In Latin, “ars” (or “skill”), yielding the word “art.”

<sup>145</sup> “Facility” also comes from the Latin verb *facere*, so that “facile” fingers are by name fingers adept at a certain type of creation.

<sup>146</sup> Again, from the Latin “facere.”

artificial, superficial, facile, affected, and infected). Despite its connections with divinity, then, particularized motion also has pejorative sinews that color it deceptive. Figuratively speaking, acts of deception do rely on subtle motion: one’s words may maneuver around the truth in an act of prevarication, or one may calculate and arrange the details of a more elaborate lie. Though figurative, such motion is never far removed from its literal correlates: the liar is seen to fidget in nervous apprehension, and the mastermind flutters his fingers, as if miming a smaller scale, cognitive management.



**Image 4: Mr. Burns and manipulative motion<sup>147</sup>**

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<sup>147</sup> Matt Groening, “Montgomery Burns,” The Simpsons, FOX, THE SIMPSONS &#x2122; and &#xa9;2001TCFFC ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ©2001FOX BROADCASTING CR: FOX, foxflash.com (accessed November 18, 2012).

Even in the world of cartooning, fine hand motion emanates outward as a visible symptom of mendacity lying within the skull and appears perhaps most vividly in the popular imagination as part of one “villain” phenotype, exemplified by Mr. Burns from the *Simpsons*.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, the word “manipulative” today has come to denote, first and foremost, a deceitful character trait, while the word’s etymological origin in the human hand rides along vestigially in caricature.

But deception and particularity have a more pragmatic and ancient connection in deceptive deeds. British chirological writings help trace (and reinscribe) such connections between inner character and outward deed. Citing Sidonius and Cicero, Bulwer urges the seventeenth-century orator against the use of the *arguta manus*, with its “certain quick and over-fine delicate motions of the fingers, such as our jugglers use who perform tricks by sleight of hand and who, by a colorable craft, mock the eye.”<sup>149</sup> Bulwer alludes to manipulation as a literal, spatial act that aims to trick or escape the senses. Slight of hand is the *modus operandi* of the pickpocket and the cardsharp whose practical deeds of deception illustrate more literally the metaphoric *epideixis* of the rhetor. In his colorful explication, Bulwer recounts how “cheats and pilfering fellows”

...can bereave one of a thing unperceived; for such mercurialists, who address themselves to filch and [who] lurching closely, assay *under-hand* to steal a thing *hand-smooth* away, do in the cursed *handicraft* of theft (out of a kind of cunning choice) employ the left hand which is the hand that lies more out of sight and is far less observed than the right hand is.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See Figure 10.

<sup>149</sup> John Bulwer, *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: Or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, ed. James W. Cleary (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 229, original emphasis.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, original emphasis.

The dexterous (literally “right”) hand assumes a role of flashy distraction, entertaining the eye while the left hand covertly snatches the goods. With its high concentration of joints, its tentacle-like extensions, and its impressive versatility, the hand has a magnetism that focuses the sight of a viewer. Simon Vouet’s 1620 painting *The Fortune Teller* displays a “contrived show of gesturing hands” to tell the ironical story of a duped gypsy [Image 5]. The mini-catalogue of hand positions creates a visually loud focal point in the center of the painting, which turns out to be a site of emptiness, drawing attention away from the quietest yet most important hand of all.



Image 5: Simon Vouet, *The Fortuneteller*<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Simon Vouet (1590-1649), *The Fortuneteller*, 1620, 120 X 170 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, Photo Credit: Scala/White Images /Art Resource, NY.



Vouet's audience experiences, for a moment, the dazzlement which the gypsy herself falls prey to. While depicting the hand as an instrument of meaningful gesture, it also betrays the hand's emptiness in concealment of, or distraction from, meaning. The sort of "showing forth" of rhetorical *epideixis* here finds a physical corollary in manual delivery, which betrays an inherently stagey aspect. Though the hand seems to be a useful semantic guide, its unique abilities may be used for the opposite purpose, with the result that facile motion is frequently the suspect of speciousness if not outright vacuity. With its urgent pull on the eyes, a flurry of jazz fingers or the splayed hand of a magician promises some weighty substance but, often, gives a mere show. If indeed Aristotle's fifth canon of rhetoric was unduly neglected by rhetoricians throughout the centuries, as Austin complained in 1806,<sup>152</sup> it is perhaps no wonder. Gestural display, especially from its most dazzling instrument, the human hand, can connote deception with particular tenacity—a tenacity which, it would seem, predates even the verb stem "fac," stretching back to the fine act of theft itself.

Neither is it mysterious that the fifth canon should find its fullest flourish in the especially feminine elocutionary movement. Though women did not become the theorists and intended readers of elocutionary theory until the discipline immigrated to America after the turn of the twentieth century,<sup>153</sup> femininity had a special presence even for the foundational British writers—if only in the form of a fearful anti-model. For instance, a feminine essence is perceived by John Bulwer and G.L. Austin to delineate the proper bounds of their discipline.

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<sup>152</sup> Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia or A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*, ed. Mary Margaret Robb and Lester Thonssen (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), ix.

<sup>153</sup> I.e., in the American Delsarte movement; see Merrill D. Whitburn et al., "Elocution and Feminine Power in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century: The Career of Carolyn Winkler (Paterson) as Performer and Teacher," *Rhetoric Review* 30 (2011): 393-94, accessed November 27, 2012, doi: 10.1080/07350198.2011.604610.

The theatrical and the effeminate become helpful signposts for the rhetor, alerting him to the limits of moderation and thereby ensuring a respectable, masculine delivery.<sup>154</sup> Because of its capacity for particularized motion, the hand especially must be reigned in. Enlisting Aristotle, Cato, Seneca, and Plutarch, Bulwer writes the ancient history of the limp wrist: “To wag the hand in a swinging gesture is their natural expression who would endeavor to hasten themselves in progressive motion, and withal denotes a kind of *wantonness* or *effeminacy*.”<sup>155</sup> The same motion which Bulwer attributes to jugglers and thieves, “the subtle gesticulation and toying behavior of the hands” or the “chattering vanity of the fingers,” he condemns as “ridiculous weakness.”<sup>156</sup> Afflicting one famous Roman orator in particular, such “effeminate and dissolutely active” gestures earned him the nick-name “stage-player” and “*gesticulariam Dionysiam*, as if he had been but the zany and ape of Dionysia, a tumbling girl and she-mimic of those times.”<sup>157</sup> Because they inhere in manual motion, the feminine and the theatrical loom dangerously over a rhetor’s delivery. Although his *Chironomia* specifically addresses males,<sup>158</sup> G.L. Austin includes several female figures within the eleven plate illustrations that accompany his text. Relegated to the final two plates that comprise a section of dramatic gestures, the women serve as the cautionary boundary toward which a gentleman must not go: “the liberty of the theatre would be licentiousness in the orator, and he is to guard himself carefully against it.”<sup>159</sup> With frightening ease, it seems, the art of delivery may “degenerate into triviality or

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<sup>154</sup> Philippa M. Spoel, “The Science of Rhetoric in Gilbert Austin’s ‘Chironomia,’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 20 & 24.

<sup>155</sup> Bulwer, 62-3.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>158</sup> I.e., in Austin’s words, the “liberal and enlightened persons in the different professions” (xi).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

affectation” or “transgress by extravagance”<sup>160</sup>—thus entering the fictive realm of the actress, with her jeweled gowns and her dazzling yet empty gestures. As the vigilance of Austin and Bulwer suggests, manual motion comes prepackaged with deceptive and feminine meaning.

As Austin and Bulwer’s preoccupation with the ancients suggests, the linkage of women and particularity was a great and old inheritance. And, as far as their circumscription of “effeminate” bodily motion resonates (albeit disturbingly) in our twenty-first-century imaginations, we too inherit the misogynist tradition. Understanding the practical reasons behind the linkage is not to essentialize further but, rather, to disarm the association, and to destigmatize the abstract concept of particularity: its subjects and the objects they make. Practically speaking, fine manual motion bundled itself with the demographic that most often utilized such motion. Because the role of child rearing historically fell to women in sexual divisions of labor,<sup>161</sup> they have also been responsible for the repetitive, stationary crafts that produced, for instance, cord, netting, and basketry in the Mesolithic age.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, ever since what archaeologists call the String Revolution, refined motion has had a concrete and tenacious connection to womanhood; as part of daily life, for countless generations, women used their hands to craft, knit, sew, and weave. The creative element of the fiber crafts took on more than literal meaning in epic figures such as the Parcae, who spin out the fates of so many dramatic figures. Aristophanes’ spinster Lysistrata finds herself in an ironic position at the center of Athenian political life, standing comically as a metonym for the womanly knowledge she gained in the privacy of her knitting bench. In the hands of Homer’s Penelope, the domestic act of weaving (in Latin, “texere”)

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>161</sup> Sharlotte Neely Williams, “The Limitations of the Male/Female Activity Distinction among Primates: An Extension of Judith K. Brown’s ‘A Note on the Division of Labor by Sex,’” *American Anthropologist* New Series 73.3 (June 1971): 805-06.

<sup>162</sup> Barber, 53.

produces textile of a spurious sort; by day, the weaving of Laerte's burial shroud serves as pretext for her refusal to receive a long line of unwanted suitors. And, by night, her undoing of the same shroud refreshes the ruse for the next day. Penelope's "hanging web," as Ovid calls it, with which she sought "all through the night to deceive,"<sup>163</sup> bears an ontological connection to the delicate motions that brought it into existence—the same motions that fell to women *in toto*, first as practical duty, and eventually as defining characteristic.

Although we harken to such ancient sources, Homer and Plutarch are not, of course, the objects of this study. But our radical focus, on etymology and even prehistory, locates symbolic roots that formed early and have intertwined continually across the millennia.<sup>164</sup> Despite the vast historical space between Aristotle, Bulwer, Ravel, and ourselves, the gendering of motion traverses that distance entirely, and, over and over, while gender essentialism manifests itself differently in a given context, the knell of misogyny rings eerily familiar each time. As Naomi Schor reminds us, to recognize sexist tropes in their various and perennial manifestations is also

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<sup>163</sup> "nec mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem/ lassaret viduas pendula tela manus"; Ovid, "Heroides I," transcribed by David J. Califf, *The Latin Library*, lines 9-10, my translation.

<sup>164</sup> Episodes that mark, in some ways, progress toward a gender equality in terms of occupation and social status may, in other ways, be seen to reinforce women's associations with fine, manual acts and the text(ile)s which result. For example, the promotion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women to the professional status of authors simultaneously reinscribed feminine labor as a textual, domestic act, relegated to the frivolous world of fiction. And, in the nineteenth-century French garment industry, the invention of the sewing machine at once launched the female into the public workforce while also ensuring her continued connection to textiles and the fine-tipped (now modernized) tool that created them; Juliet Shields, review of Batchelor *Women's Work: Labor, Gender, Authorship 1750-1830*, by Jennie Batchelor, *Modern Language Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (December 2011): 555; and Katrina Honeyman, review of *The Politics of Women's Work: The Parisian Garment Trades (1750-1915)*, by Judith Coffin, *Business History* 39, no. 2 (April 1997): 128.

to find ourselves implicit in their reproduction. “To focus on the place and function of the detail” in more recent times

is to become aware that the normative aesthetics elaborated and disseminated by the Academy and its members is not sexually neutral; it is an axiology carrying into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallogocentric cultural order.<sup>165</sup>

If Ravel’s *Ondine* spills over with particularized movement, if his high hand positions smack of the limp-wristed dandy, if fluttery fingers evoke the nervous trickster, if splayed digits connote effeminacy, and if ornamental flourishes seem to trace the frills of an evening gown, then we, as historians, have an unusually rich and queer artifact in Ravel’s score, an artifact that references manuality with special attention to its feminine and theatrical sinews. To ignore this self-claimed liminality in *Ondine* is to pretend that prejudice of the masculine order had no bearing in *fin-de-siècle* Paris and, furthermore, that it has no bearing in the performances and scholarship surrounding the composer, even today. In a more positively hurtful sense, to dismiss queer movement as unworthy the attention given to historically sanctioned modes of investigation is to comply with normative interests built into the Academy and to simply retell a *werk*-based teleology. Once we presume the notes on the page to be the sole and petrified source of analysis, we forget that music, like other fine arts, touches a human body. Precisely because it displays pejorated motion, *Ondine* does not simply touch Ravel’s body and the bodies of his performers, it touches and shapes an imaginary queer body: a simulacrum of those various “over-fine delicate motions” that mark the other as shameless wanton, invert, or, more hatefully, cunt or faggot. Ravel’s pianism encodes his own contribution to *fin-de-siècle* gender revision, while also provisioning disruptive action through its future players. As we shall see below, his fleeting

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<sup>165</sup> Schor, 4.

performance of effeminacy becomes a more sustained, reiterable disruption of heteronormative ideals, helping simultaneously to chip away at imperatives of gender conformity while also sculpting a more tenable imagined body with which outcasts might identify.

## 6.0 DIACHRONIC ANALYSES OF *ONDINE*

For all his associations with musical virtuosity, Ravel was not considered an especially gifted performer.<sup>166</sup> His acceptance at age fourteen to piano classes at the Paris Conservatoire reveals undoubtable pianistic inclination; yet despite occasional spots of success in competitions, Ravel's time at the Conservatoire is marked by consistent lackluster and skepticism on the part of his teachers. Passing beneath the radar of his first professor, Eugene Anthiome, who branded his pupil with a perfunctory "bon élève," Ravel found himself next in the senior class of Charles de Beriot. Showing a more precise and persistent dissatisfaction with a number of problems marring his pupil's taste and technique, de Beriot charged Ravel with an overwrought "romantic" quality, a lack of control, and "a tendency to overdo his effects."<sup>167</sup> Ravel's early diagnosed shortcomings persisted in feeding his notoriety as a hardly proficient keyboardist: the musicologist-composer Paul Landormy described the late teenage Ravel as playing "with very strange ideas in mind, but with a technique that was rather rough and stiff,"<sup>168</sup> and, in less kind

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<sup>166</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 33; To amass Ravel's failures on a single page may seem unfair and reductionist, especially considering his many conventional successes. For, even at the keyboard, Ravel did have at least a couple of shining moments (for example, see Howat, *French Piano Music*, 161). However, I trace an effect not so quantifiable, or the point at which the critics' words strike the queer psyche, sculpting it to be something by definition other than the ideal to which it is held.

<sup>167</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 13.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

terms, Chabrier wrote that the seventeen-year-old “played like a pig.”<sup>169</sup> Throughout his life, even after he gained popular success through composition, Ravel was known as a disappointing performer, said by one critic in 1928 to play “even worse than Johannes Brahms did in his declining years”;<sup>170</sup> the same year, another critic described the pianist as “polished, infinitely whimsical, yet remote and preoccupied, as though he were gazing with wonder upon what he had done and puzzling vaguely whether he could ever do it again.”<sup>171</sup> Having no pedagogical exactness, such complaints point beyond any specific musical inability, indicating instead Ravel’s holistic failure to inhabit convincingly an expected type. Resorting to a language of either non-descript “weirdness” or hyperbolic insult, the critics contend with the same illegibility that led not only to Ravel’s ultimate dismissal from de Beriot’s piano class in 1895, but also to a string of failures meted out by the Academy, including expulsion from harmony and composition classes and culminating in five failed attempts at the *Prix de Rome*.<sup>172</sup>

The irony of these critical statements, as they slam the normative gavel with such trained reflex, is that their puzzled attributions point to the very queerness that would beget artistic products of great popularity and respect. Indeed, whatever rough, whimsical, even porcine qualities detractors saw in Ravel’s piano technique, they also saw, simultaneously, the mechanism through which Ravel’s idiom was impressed; for that “fidgety little man seated at the piano”<sup>173</sup> was not by accident the composer of *Ondine*’s nervous tremolo. Though contemporary society may have seen in Ravel a strange creature, fit yet imperfectly for the purposes of the

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>172</sup> Kelly, “Ravel, Maurice.”

<sup>173</sup> Nichols, *Ravel*, 292.



signifying world, we, in hindsight, may see a being in protest, whose grotesque form became the very mold of its own legitimation.

Resisting the urge to forge a story of unlikely triumph, in which a liminal subject bursts into existence by winning the hearts of the normative populace, the more cautious and productive reading emphasizes the subject thrust within an ongoing discourse, forced to represent itself using a lexicon of inapplicable or undesirable terms, and forever negotiating between a gaze of recognition and that of hatred. Here, then, is a polarized story—at once terribly personal and at once depersonalized—a story which interpellates *Ondine*'s many players as experiential, meaning-making subjects while also obliterating those subjects as resonant vessels for the reiteration of queer battle cry. Treating both of these registers in turn, we will construct the individual before dissolving it into the collective. Section 6.1 explores the most immediate and personal implications of embodying Ravel's motion, asking along the way what sorts of knowledge such an embodied performance may grant. Section 6.2 moves away from Ravelian motion *per se* and toward the texts through which that motion has come to signify within the order of logos. More specifically, Ravel's style of movement is shown to produce musical structures critical of the Academy's ideals, and the score, in turn, is shown to be a prescriptive artifact through which a subject may re-invoke its gender-critical message.

## **6.1 PLAYING (WITH) RAVEL: THE PHENOMENAL DELIGHTS OF PIANISM**

At the most banal level, learning to play any difficult piece of music is an exercise in repeating a complicated series of motions made by someone who came before. Through practice, the pianist disciplines his or her phenomenal world, so as to recreate a several-minute chunk of existence

time and again, sharing an intimacy (even if distant or imagined) with others who have felt those same motions. By playing *Ondine*, a pianist does more than simply reference or invoke the composer but may convene with Ravel's desirous process. Such an analysis requires a continued focus on bodily motion but, this time, with an eye to *perception* as the prime act of "being in and toward the world."<sup>174</sup> Merleau-Ponty discourages an understanding of the world as a fixed realm of arranged matter, always-already constituted by a set of discernible facts; the world, rather, *happens* for each of us as an original sum of our bodily experiences:

The motor experience of our body is not a particular case of knowledge; rather, it offers us a manner of reaching the world and the object, a 'praktognosia,' that must be recognized as original, and perhaps as primary.<sup>175</sup>

Merleau-Ponty thus distinguishes between empirical knowledge of the world and a more visceral knowledge gathered, or rather enacted, kinesthetically. The centrality of one's body in founding experience makes it a "knowing body,"<sup>176</sup> one which grasps the sensual world not so much to beget subjectivity as to achieve it. For the pianist, such a movement-based epistemology presents exciting possibilities. And, for the instrumentalist in general, a theory that privileges bodily action as a special (indeed the prime) means of knowing and being known grants new importance to the act of performance. For, "per-formance" would seem to prescribe a series of forms or bodily positions that stand like frozen silhouettes, each realized in turn by interpolated movement.<sup>177</sup> To be exact, artistic performances have cultural significance that reaches beyond

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<sup>174</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 103.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>177</sup> The word *performance* actually does not descend from the Latin *forma* but, rather, from the Old High German word meaning "to furnish or provide," passing through the Old French word *parfournir*. But the word's alteration to *parfourmer* in Anglo-Norman French

the physical motions which constitute those performances; for instance, a stage actor's performance insinuates itself within the arc of a larger narrative to be discerned as the true "substance" of the artwork. However, performance *as such*—performance as motion itself—has an unappreciated significance in its phenomenal sense. To whatever extent performance is informed by a prescriptive text, the musician may be seen to share a slice of experience with the myriad subjects whose world was (or will be) at some time constituted by those same prescribed motions.

Yet, furthermore, because the performer does not merely mimic the requirements of a score but masters them, perhaps through thousands of repetitions and countless hours of meditation, the process of performance is more truly owned by the performing subject. The leaping left hand of a Chopin waltz, for instance, begins its study dubiously, when the pianist is still caught between reading the notes and directing the treacherous "oom-pa-pa" figures. Upon memorization and repetition, the pianist no longer directs the arm but rather watches like a spectator, as the arm compels itself toward the remote bass notes of the downbeat, and as the whole body is likewise driven forth by a pre-notional desire. Involving the entire body in such a multi-sensory process, performance allows the subject to feel as others have felt, to want as they have wanted. When broken down into a series of more discrete motions, a piano piece may be seen as a multiplication of the simpler processes of everyday embodiment. The multifarious screen of perception that constitutes lived experience reduces, for Merleau-Ponty, to a common recurring scenario, in which "the object of desire supplants the self as center":

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(from which we get *perform*) is indeed attributed to its association with the Latin word meaning "form"; *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "perform, v.," accessed August 14, 2012, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140780?redirectedFrom=perform&>.

This experience, though entirely mundane and unremarkable, is a decentering of the self that happens because I turn toward another, and yet that other magically restores me to myself by persisting as the focused and sustained object of my look. The reach, too, is something that is simultaneously disorienting, dizzying, decentering, *and* consolidating, purposeful, incorporative. When I am thirsty, I move toward the glass on the table, unbend my arm, grasp the glass, move it up to my lips and drink. This is not a matter of cognition, but of changing my comportment, my embodiment, my bodily being so that it encompasses the object of my desire and interacts with it.<sup>178</sup>

Guided by the score, an instrumentalist shares this decentering experience with the other—precisely the way people might share the impetus to grab a cup of water—but extended and sustained through the temporal length of a composition and multiplied by the permeated series of motions required of each limb, joint, and digit. Stationed by the keyboard, like a Cartesian grid for mapping those frozen silhouettes, the score enables a habitation with the other, not as an external object to grab, but as a vitality incorporated (more literally) beneath one’s own skin.

Such a movement-based epistemology would perhaps find special welcome in Ravel studies. As much as we wish to subjectify Ravel and to thicken our understanding with some real substance—perhaps a confession of identity, or a scandalous journal entry—we are confounded time and again by his damning façade. Yet this assumed surface, this erected shield with which Ravel moved in the world and ordered the objects (oftentimes the ivories) of his environment, is itself the organ of his experience; it is Ravel’s cuticle to the world and the membrane that policed his inmost desires. That is not to say that Ravel’s physical form and its attendant motions tell the being’s entire story, as if his deepest fears and favorite stories were somehow encrypted in a wave of his hand. But the importance of a body-based communion with

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<sup>178</sup> Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 53.

Ravel lies in the very essence and carnality of the act. In fact, composerly incorporation strangely mirrors and in some sense exceeds the more literal act of sexuality involving two proximal bodies. From the subject's point of view, Gayle Salamon imagines sex to be

a displacement of the body as a coherent amalgam of thinking...[and] a dissolution of the body as material ground, as phenomenological center of its own world. That center, suddenly, is shared. So self and other together comprise not only the joined unit of my affective life but also the phenomenological pivot of sensory apprehension of the world.<sup>179</sup>

That one might share such an experience with a person dead since 1937 surely snubs space and time: enabling conjugation without material presence, and penetration without intercourse. Even more, such incorporation seems to perfect the goals of maximum cutaneous contact and inter-subjective connection implicit in more mundane versions of the sexual act: thus sharing the familiar epistemological trajectory to know full-good-and-well the body one has reached for. If the feeling is not describable in precise terms, then it is that much closer to the confounding yet indispensable significance humanity finds in more literal acts of sexual incorporation.

Lest the pleasurable effects of this formula should threaten to undermine its own seriousness, let us cede to the threat and cut the last strand of academic pretense. Becoming a piece of pornography in the hands of the pianist, Ravel's score is not thus degraded but, indeed, set free from its scholarly frame. Embodied and imagined from within the individual, this self-directed rhetoric assumes an autoerotic nature that, paradoxically, reaches outside of itself to consume the remote other. The process does not only broach the boundary between signifier and

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 54.

signified but melds the two,<sup>180</sup> in order that one reads a text but also penetrates it—that the pianist plays Ravel but, still yet, possesses him in so doing.

Although this mimetic consumption of Ravel gives us reason enough to play the music, it also may have social effects that reach outside of the individual in a more practical sense, beyond the play of intellectual masturbation. Indeed, my discussion of pianistic comportment has thus far assumed the point of view of the performer, seeing, hearing, and feeling Ravel’s music from within the very body on the piano bench,<sup>181</sup> but much remains to be said about broader, interpersonal effects performance may have on an audience. Kenneth Burke’s theory of symbolic action, though most often explained in terms of language, holds a special place for the juxtaposition of unspeaking bodies, particularly as they are joined in sonic relation:

...The scene of musical performance offers a powerful instance of aesthetic activity writ large as always and everywhere rhetorical—that is, productive of effects... produced on and through the live and lively bodies in the audience.<sup>182</sup>

As Hawhee explains, Burke considered bodily action to elicit re-action in other bodies, which understand or identify with the emotive content of a gesture.<sup>183</sup> The ability to read other bodies in this way pinpoints gesture as the indivisible unit of communicative exchange, even as it expands to the more macroscopic social arena of the artistic stage. Burke’s *mimetic traveling* thus lends

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<sup>180</sup> I.e., in Barthe’s terms of liberating the signified from its text, revealing “a desire at once epistemological and sexual”; Robert K. Martin, “Roland Barthes: Toward an ‘Ecriture Gaie,’” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 289.

<sup>181</sup> Or, otherwise, the position of a disembodied subject whose head lies awkwardly at the end of the key bed (where the camera sat to capture Videos A, B, C, D, and E).

<sup>182</sup> Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>183</sup> Burke’s somatic notion of identification stems from his interest in linguist theorist Richard Paget; *Ibid.*, 116.

new significance to our pianistic jouissance, placed now in a full auditorium: the proscenium arch becomes a giant fenestration and the audience a peeping tom.

I, for one, have felt a voyeuristic urge while sitting in the audience, or at least a curious empathy for the musicking bodies before me, as if listening were a truly reciprocal act by which I mirror from my seat the sturdy resolve of a Martha Argerich or the breathless ecstasy and rocking torso of an Olga Kern, her sinuous melodies confirming what I see on her strained physiognomy—something between existential longing and orgasmic rapture. Though Olga may in fact be caressing Rachmaninoff, there seems no reason that we, the audience, should not share in her pleasure (or pain, as the case may be). It is here, at the site of pre-linguistic meaning, in the shared space of emoting bodies, where these words “communion” and “communication” find their common node. No doubt, my practice-room rendering of *Ondine* smacks of personal indulgence, as solipsistic as it is fantastic. But inviting others to share in my production of wordless knowledge entails a confession of no small consequence, tantamount to stepping onto the stage, pulling aside the curtains, or opening the closet door.

## 6.2 RAVEL IN DRAG: *ONDINE* AS QUEER REVISION

To understand the communicative potential of *Ondine*, the pureness of phenomena must give way to the complexity of the symbol-laden subject. For, as we know, Ravel’s body was decorated not only with particularized motions and their objects, but also with attendant words and ideas. Accordingly, pianists do not simply commune viscerally with the composer, but they also perform their way through a catalogue of culturally significant gestures. Since pianists devote considerable portions of their phenomenal lives to embodying those gestures, it follows

necessarily that such pianists are also phantasmatically invested in the process, for the notional side of life always sits atop pure experience, producing its endless commentary to shape and police one's self-conception. Exploring the possibilities latent within a body-based analysis, then, ought to entail the psychoanalytic register of fantasy, or what Butler calls the "morphological ideal": that desired image of one's being which painfully contorts itself to fit within a rigid heteronormative schema.<sup>184</sup> It is precisely because *Ondine* leads the performer through an embodied effeminacy that the piece has considerable purchase in the realm of gender fantasy.

The stakes in such an argument perhaps seem impossibly personal and limited in practicality, in the sense that every performer's identity would be an important variable in determining an individual psychic result. Yet, while the individual results of playing *Ondine* are no doubt consequential, the piece's contribution to a continuing and depersonalized gender discourse is more valuable. Regardless of one's identity or intention, the performance of Ravel's hyper-particularized movement sweeps up the subject from his or her specific situation, so that every action "echoes prior action, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices."<sup>185</sup> In everyday life, too, the same authority re-brands each individually performed act with a stamp of recognition, be it one of praise or damnation, presence/absence, possession/lack, activity/passivity, acknowledgment/disregard. With regard to Ravel's pianistic motion, the selfsame dichotomy holds sway, and the subject finds itself, for the piece's duration, as an emblem of the castrated other. To be exact, the subject does not choose to invoke the idea of effeminacy but is rather constituted at that moment by

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<sup>184</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 129.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.



being marked as such—so that the broken wrist and the digital frivolity themselves make a “queer.” The moment any subject comes into being through recognition is thus the very moment<sup>186</sup> of its erasure: “The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time.”<sup>187</sup> The player of *Ondine* may thus be seen as a vessel of gender discourse. As far as sexed tropes structure the very notes of Ravel’s score, each rendition of *Ondine* induces the heteronormative gaze<sup>188</sup> and thereby reconstitutes a queer being. Differently from phenomenological reading in Section 6.1, a gendered reading of the piece necessarily involves both performing subject as well as the real or imagined perceivers in and beyond the concert hall—in short, the whole world of judgmental sense organs that gather and confer meaning on a moving body.

The citational aspect of mattering in the world raises ethical questions about performing *Ondine*, for the act of recalling hateful or essentializing epithets (“faggy” or “politely feminine” for instance) runs the risk of reproducing their unjust effects. The risk is nonetheless a necessary one that enables the process by which abjection can be reworked as agency. As Butler argues, markers of queerness may be cited in order to “reverse and displace their originating aims”:

One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation. Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them oneself risks a complicity, a repetition, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> At such a moment, one is said to be “interpellated” into existence—as if to jump onto the belt of a moving assembly line.

<sup>187</sup> Butler, 226.

<sup>188</sup> It is only “through the repertoire of culturally intelligible images” that one may be recognized, Silverman explains; “we are all dependent for our identity upon the ‘clicking’ of an imaginary camera. This metaphoric apparatus is what Lacan calls the ‘gaze,’” (Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*,” 353).

<sup>189</sup> Butler, 123.

From a social point of view, “being in the world” is made possible only through the assumption of existing categories. And, however imperfectly those categories describe a person’s morphological ideal, whatever stigma attaches itself to a given identity, however unjust the rules of material grammar, the world offers no alternative. While the hope Butler maintains for the cooptive possibilities of queer existence remains to be explored, the toll of interpellation nonetheless continues to be a great one. Creating ontological space for oneself will always be a paradoxical investment in a language of pain and subordination.

If entering into discourse means working within established structures of signification, then Ravel may be seen to enter discourse through the language of music (a realm no less constituted by the order of logos). Expectedly then, Ravel’s bodily queerness finds translation in his musical notation, and his particularity becomes nameable within the terms of traditional musical aesthetics. This development marks a slight turn away from body-based epistemology. Whereas previous sections of this paper employed the score as a mere index pointing to Ravel’s body as desired goal, the score here becomes the goal. By viewing the score as a discursive document at once invested in normative terms yet also disruptive of those terms, one may better understand Butler’s hope in queer revision. Specifically, such as analysis shows particularized movement to produce musical structures that comment on and revise the Academy’s notions of personhood, health, and, most generally, substance.

While the piece trafficks in the markers of musical normativity, *Ondine*’s poetic program foregrounds the ideal of vocality before all others. The famous water nymph of Bertrand’s poem does not, as one might expect, conjure literal images of her watery kingdom as in a cloud of mist, but she simply sings the images in musical ekphrasis. Urging the audience to “listen! listen!”, it is Ondine’s song that threatens the fortitude of men and penetrates the auditor with such affective

force. Although the associations here between nature, danger, and the lures of woman harken even to ancient poetics<sup>190</sup> and render Ondine as a classic *femme fatale*, the centrality of the voice as a means of communication invokes another, more modern, trope in musical aesthetics. As early as the prelapsarian logic of Rousseau, melody has been privileged as the seat of musical substance, deriving importance from “the moral effects of which it is the image: namely, the cry of nature, accent, number, measure, and the pathetic and passionate tone which the agitation of the soul gives to the human voice.”<sup>191</sup> Through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the ideal of vocalicity makes its way easily toward non-verbal and non-vocal music, as, “not only the single unstained language expressing the transcendent, but an unassailable sign of living presence.”<sup>192</sup> In similar metaphoric extension, vocalicity “as the source of sonority, as a presence or resonating intelligence,” finds instance in writings of Bakhtin, Edward Cone, and Carolyn Abbate.<sup>193</sup> And, more recently, the idea of the voice “as the ideal marker of a feeling selfhood” plays importantly in Le Guin’s investigation of eighteenth-century cello music.<sup>194</sup> Especially as Ondine’s song finds explicit musical representation in the piece’s melodic line, the voice of the nymph becomes simultaneously the leading “voice” of the composition and, by extension, the voice of the composer and the performer. The connection between musical line and subjective substance thus enables *Ondine*, the piece, to signify throats other than that of its main character—namely those of Ravel and his pianist.

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<sup>190</sup> Sarah Nancy, “The ‘Deaf Ear’ of Classicism: Searching for the Female Voice in French *Tragédie Lyrique*,” *Theatre Research International* 31, no. 2 (July 2006): 121.

<sup>191</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, ed. John T. Scott (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1998) 269.

<sup>192</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 & 252-3 n 7.

<sup>194</sup> Le Guin, 24.

According to Rousseau, the special quality which imbues the voice with its power of expression is continuity. The “permanent and sustained” sound of the singing voice, implicit in the mechanism of the glottis, remains a vestige of our innocent and virtuous forbears and their ability to emote free from the interruption of linguistic sounds.<sup>195</sup> Though Rousseau’s state of nature may be seen to pre-exist meaning in a linguistic sense,<sup>196</sup> the primordial groan of early human beings not only sufficed as communication but (because of its freedom from disruption) more perfectly expressed human desire. In France between the 1890 and 1930, the aesthetic ideal of sincerity reigned virtually unchallenged as a site of very similar formulations of subjectivity.<sup>197</sup> A constellation of terms gathered around Gabriel Faure as the prototype of the sincere composer lauding a “oneness of being” and a “unique inner self” which he could translate into music of authenticity and moral exemplarity.<sup>198</sup> French philosophers likewise found in melody the perfect allegory for subjective interiority; Bergson, for instance, sought a state of *pure duration*, as “the indivisible and indestructible continuity of a melody whose past enters into its present and forms with it an undivided whole,” and, as “the continuous melody of our inner life, a persistent melody that will endure, indivisible from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence.”<sup>199</sup> The ethical language surrounding the discourse of subjective utterance reveals what is at stake—nothing less than the wholeness of one’s being.

The employment of an ideal vocality more current in today’s popular imagination is less lofty but more practical than Bergson’s. Though perhaps most often invoked in situations of vocal and choral pedagogy, the privileging of continuity will also be familiar to many

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<sup>195</sup> Rousseau, 261 & 263.

<sup>196</sup> Nancy, 124.

<sup>197</sup> Caballero, 41.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

instrumentalists, who have likely struggled to “make it sing” at the behest of a dissatisfied teacher. Le Guin uses the idea of vocal continuity in this sense, as a kinesthetic ideal, transferrable to music-making parts of the body besides the larynx: “Shifting up and down the [cello’s] neck, by progressively shortening and lengthening the strings, mimes the melodic ‘shapes’ created by the invisible shortening and lengthening of vocal chords.”<sup>200</sup> For an instrumentalist, writes Le Guin, “to be launched upon a melody, airborne among the expressive and muscular demands of shaping it, seems only to be adequately described by reference to the experience of singing.”<sup>201</sup>

As pleasurable as it sounds, to soar atop a melody, the analogy might more aptly be described as haunting for some instrumentalists, such as certain pitched percussionists. Especially because the piano’s tones are each produced on separate, struck strings, “voicing” any melody requires a more labored approximation of the vocal ideal. Lacking the ability to slide between notes—as one may do with the vocal folds or an unfretted instrument neck—the pianist must “fake it” through a combination of careful timing, pedaling, and consistent fluctuation of dynamic level. By its very category of percussion, the piano’s acoustic activity is predicated on the act of striking and, accordingly, on the distinctive onset sound<sup>202</sup> that marks a dislocation from the timber of a sustained pitch. The cello, in contrast, may ease onto each new note with little onset noise and greater fluidity within the melodic line. The smooth, planar movement of the cello’s bow aids the continuity and, through consistent contact with the strings, establishes its own privilege as a voice of solidity, substance, and presence.

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<sup>200</sup> Le Guin, 22.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>202</sup> Or “attack sound.”

The piano's inherent disjunction makes it an instrument prone to neuroses—a truly queer instrument, tasked unfairly against a symbolic ideal barely approximable by the makeup of its hammers and strings. As far as any melody strives for staid motion and uninterrupted presence, the piano is fundamentally flawed. And, as far as Ravel delights in an especially discontinuous pianism, *Ondine* may be read as one hyperbolic flaw.

From *Ondine*'s beginning, the incessant pulse of the right hand tremolo never once allows any two notes of the left hand's line to occur in simple succession to one another, with the result that the particular is pitted against the general.<sup>203</sup> One might perceive this particle/substance dichotomy as a visual field of two depths: a foreground of vaporous particles obscuring the substantial object of focus behind it, that object perhaps being the nymph. As the melody entwines with the space of the trembling figure, the left-hand (sometimes sharing pitches with the right hand) must be brought out prominently from the texture while still maintaining the sense of a single, delicate utterance.<sup>204</sup>

After the first statements of the opening melody, the piece unfolds in its covert sonata form,<sup>205</sup> in which subsequent melodic statements intertwine with accompaniments of increasing volatility. Visually, one might understand the succession of themes as equivalent to *Ondine*'s tableau of watery scenes, which she presents to the narrator with ever greater affectation. As the hands interact in more complicated ways, the boundary between particle and substance becomes

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<sup>203</sup> The only exception to the disruptive presence of the accompaniment is during *Ondine*'s final plea (see **Figure 4** above, mm. 84-7). The uniqueness of that naked moment in relation to the elsewhere obscured melodies takes it beyond cloying and toward the melodramatic. If there had been any question in the listener's mind of a sincere message, these measures affirm its lack. In presenting what has become, by this point in the piece, a caricature of "lyrical ardor," Ravel ironizes expressive intent and betrays his mistrust of subjective representation (Whitesell, "Erotic Ambiguity," 85).

<sup>204</sup> For example, mm. 5 and 11 require complex crossings and sharing of keyboard space.

<sup>205</sup> See *Ondine*'s formal-harmonic outline above [**1.1 existing analyses of *Ondine***].

less distinct: figures are dispersed across greater registral distances,<sup>206</sup> and the hands trade off between parts of melody and accompaniment.<sup>207</sup> Though the pianist is still charged with the duty of singing forth the melody, as if it came uninterrupted from Ondine's mouth, the accompaniment seems determined to thwart those efforts.

The “*soutenu et expressif*” return of theme 2 in the development section marks one of several climaxes in melodic disjuncture.<sup>208</sup> As if to foreground the act of vocal dissemblance, Ravel divides all musical material (both melody and accompaniment) evenly between the hands, so that every successive note of the melody falls to the opposite hand. Meanwhile in the accompaniment, Ravel's superimposition of four-note patterns over triplet figures prevents aural division of the beat into submetrical units and thus gives the accompaniment an amorphous quality, out of which the more substantial voice may arise. Flexible wrists and practiced facility are the very least of requirements to make this passage “sing.” Yet despite one's efforts to produce a convincing aural result—that is, to give undeniable presence to the voice—the attendant visual result would seem to defy easy consumption. Tucked within the ascending eddies of the accompaniment, the melody is concealed from clear view, for the viewer cannot read or sense exactly how such a flurry of fingers could result in so discernable a line.<sup>209</sup> Ravel's pianist thus exercises a sort of magicanship by creating discrepancy between sight and sound.<sup>210</sup> Deceptive as it may be, the passage nonetheless asserts a profound truth: that the privileged and praised signifiers of personhood are as empty as Ondine's marriage proposal.

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<sup>206</sup>E.g., m. 14.

<sup>207</sup> See **Figure 5**, mm. 38-40, and **Video A**, 2:10-2:20.

<sup>208</sup> See **Figure 7**.

<sup>209</sup> For comparison, the short **Video B** isolates the melody of **Figure 7**, rendering it slowly without accompaniment.

<sup>210</sup> Watching the hands without listening and listening without watching helps highlight the textural ambiguity in this passage.



Video C: *Ondine*, isolated theme from Figure 7

52

*p le chant bien soutenu et expressif*

53

*augmentez*

Figure 7: *Ondine*, visually concealed melodic line, mm. 52-54<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> See **Video A**, 3:08-3:20.



Understanding Ravel's pointalistic musical structures to be indistinguishable as results of his conscious and unconscious being, one cannot say whether the rhetorical implications of those structures occurred to Ravel. It is undeniable however that particularity exists as an implied argument against the more positive side of the dichotomy. Whatever its name—wholeness, generality, continuity, or substance—each of these terms stands as a positive presence in opposition to the less desirable particle. At the piano, particular movement begets structures of secondary importance (accompaniments and virtuosic flourishes), often distracting from the “real” object of art (the melody). Yet in *Ondine*, the terms of musical substance are contested by the betrayal of a particularity inherent within the melody itself. Ravel's deconstructive use of particularity is here given to interdisciplinary analogy in another of Beardsley's decadent pen drawings, *Battle of the Beaux and the Belles*.<sup>212</sup> Serving as one of several illustrations for Alexander Pope's satire *The Rape of the Lock*, Beardsley's drawing “celebrates the dandified urbanity and precious elegance of the eighteenth-century salon while [also reflecting] the artist's own ... ambivalent Decadent equipose.”<sup>213</sup> By flooding the picture's surface with detail, Beardsley effects the near obliteration of proper line; except for the occasional object outline, the work consists entirely of surface detail. Especially in the more diaphanous parts of the women's dresses, the fine stippling becomes confused with expected structural boundaries—where outright lines would demarcate one material object from the other. Without proper demarcation, the substance of any one object (e.g., a wig) seems to spill over its edges, fusing it with its surroundings and threatening to replace the representative tableau with a patterned mass of ornament.

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<sup>212</sup> See **Image 6**.

<sup>213</sup> Snodgrass, 285.



Image 6: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Rape of the Lock*<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, "The Battle of the Beaux and the Belles," *The Rape of the Lock*, in *Aubrey Beardsley*, by Robert Ross (New York: John Lane Co., 2010), reproduced here with permission.

As if in ironic anticipation of *The Rape*'s harshest critiques (as "ornate and flaccid," "anxiously segmental," and "tedious")<sup>215</sup> Beardsley erases conventional markers of substance and replaces them with the ambiguous structure implied by ornament. Although the scene suggests a three-dimensional room, its privileging of fineness flattens the sense of spatial recession and redoubles the painting's status as a piece of artifice. As contemporaries, Ravel and Beardsley alike create the effect of line through consecutive points in space and time but, simultaneously foreground that effect as mere construction, so that, for both artists, the detail proves in paradox to be the substance of substance. Though Ondine's song would seem full-bodied, it is shown to be nothing more than a construction of separately-struck keys—begotten of the same mists thought to obscure it.

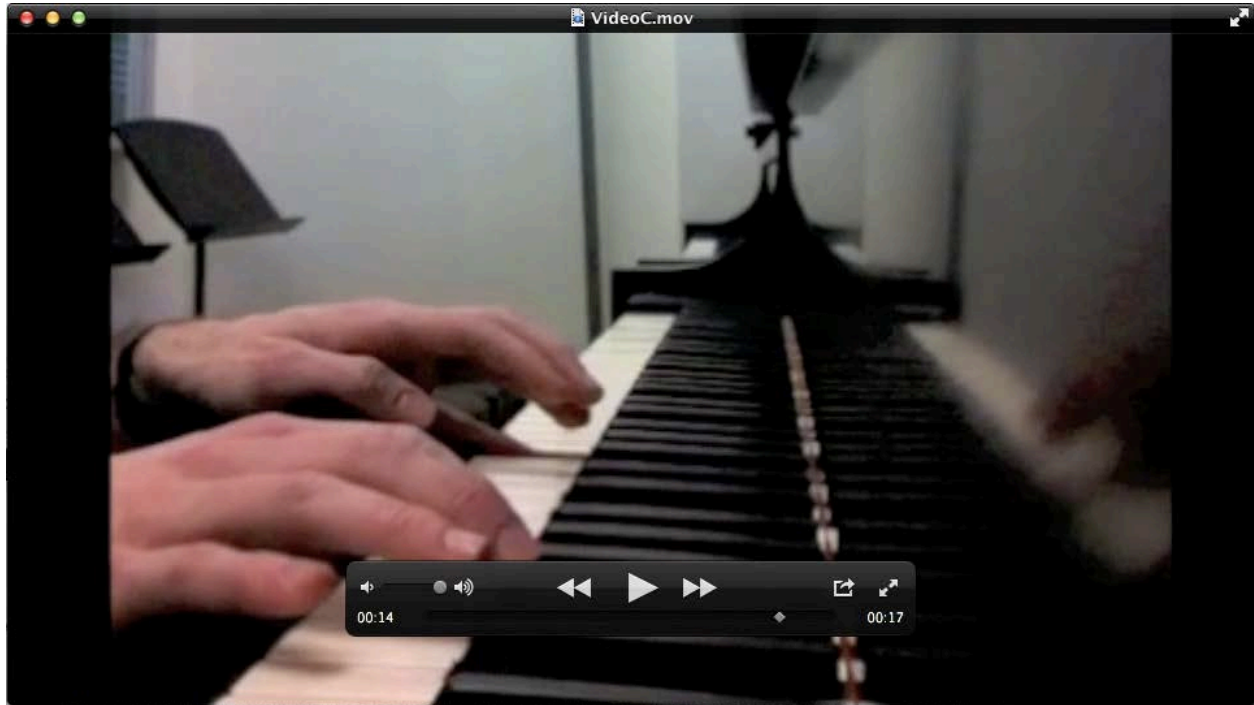
In light of the similar deconstructive function of visual and musical ornament, it is no surprise that both types fall under the same pathological categories. For many aestheticians in the *fin de siècle*, "destabilized boundaries between structure and ornament signified a perversion of taste where decorative excess denoted psychological instability, mental illness, ...irrationality, ...and hysteria."<sup>216</sup> While identities of the pathologized indeed have a certain liminal status, as beings at risk of falling beyond the boundaries of recognized personhood, they also have a potency of presence by virtue of their aberration. If wholeness and continuity signify the upright subject, then it must be the subject's disintegration into much smaller and obsessive bits which constitutes the profligate and the insane. Particularity thus entails presence in numbers or density, a sort of sick excess resulting from a microscopic vantage point. *Ondine*'s aberration from aesthetic ideals approaches such excessiveness. Whereas the previous musical example

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<sup>215</sup> Ian Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 166; see Snodgrass, 285.

<sup>216</sup> Bhogal, 116-17.

illustrated a critique of vocalicity through melodic segmentation, the next example illustrates its harsher critique through veritable rupture of the melody.



**Video D: *Ondine*, isolated theme from Figure 8**

In the first eight measures of the development, the excited splashes of the accompaniment progress to a full scale buffeting that swallows up Ondine's song<sup>217</sup> and becomes the main object of interest both aural and visual. However subtly a pianist plays the ornamental flourishes, their virtuosity commands the ear's attention and sometimes encourages a more or less strategic rubato in the melody, allowing in turn for a more accurate and nuanced rendering of the flourish.<sup>218</sup> The visual result of Ravel's notation is one of epideictic display and concealment. The active right hand attracts the eye with a digital magnetism while the left hand continues to

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<sup>217</sup> Here, a statement of theme 1; see **Video D** for the bare melody.

<sup>218</sup> For instance, see Martha Argerich's performance; Martha Argerich, "Martha Argerich Ravel Gaspard de la nuit I. Ondine," YouTube video, posted by "annaandya," July 6, 2012, <http://youtu.be/Rj8cBmWZhP0>, 2:05-2:35.

spell out the gradually degraded vocal line. As the flourishes grow in size, so does the choreography, suggesting in mm. 47 and 48 a theatrical hand split.<sup>219</sup> Although the final flourish in m. 49 acts as a sort of ironic anti-climax, marked *très doux*, its enormous temporal and registral presence secure its pride of place above the stretched-out melody below.

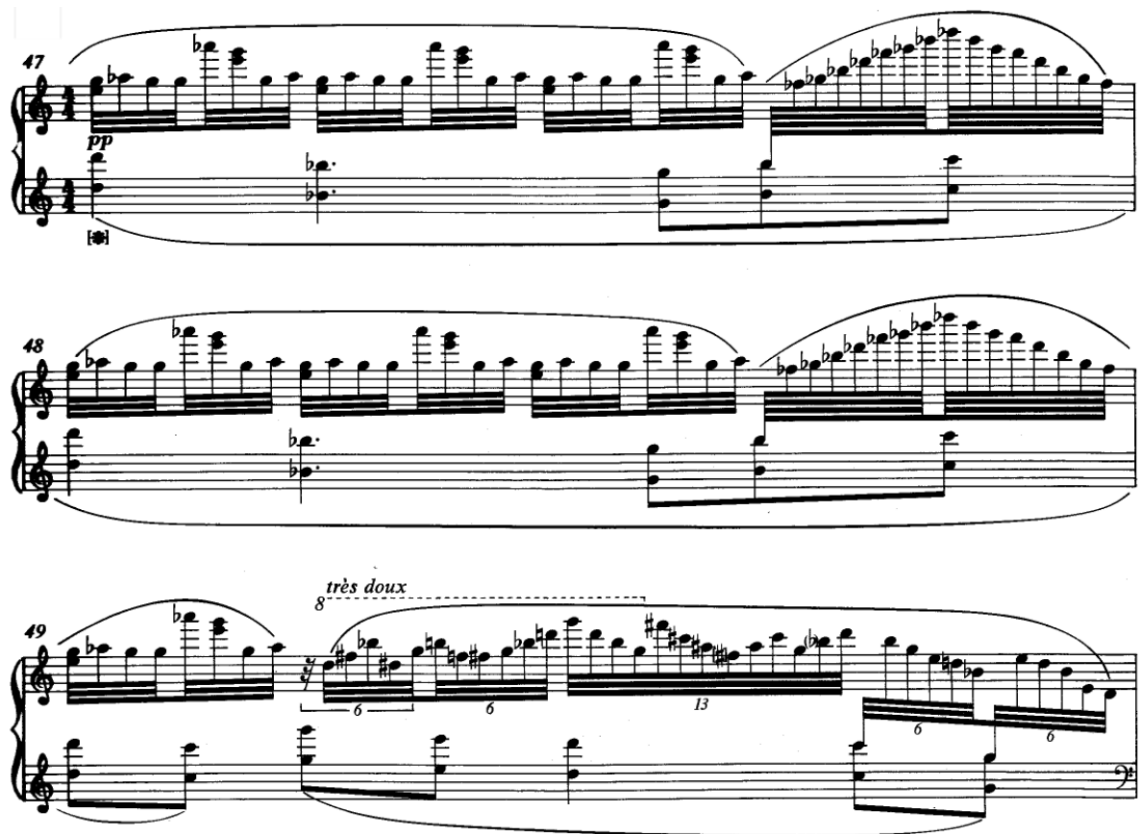
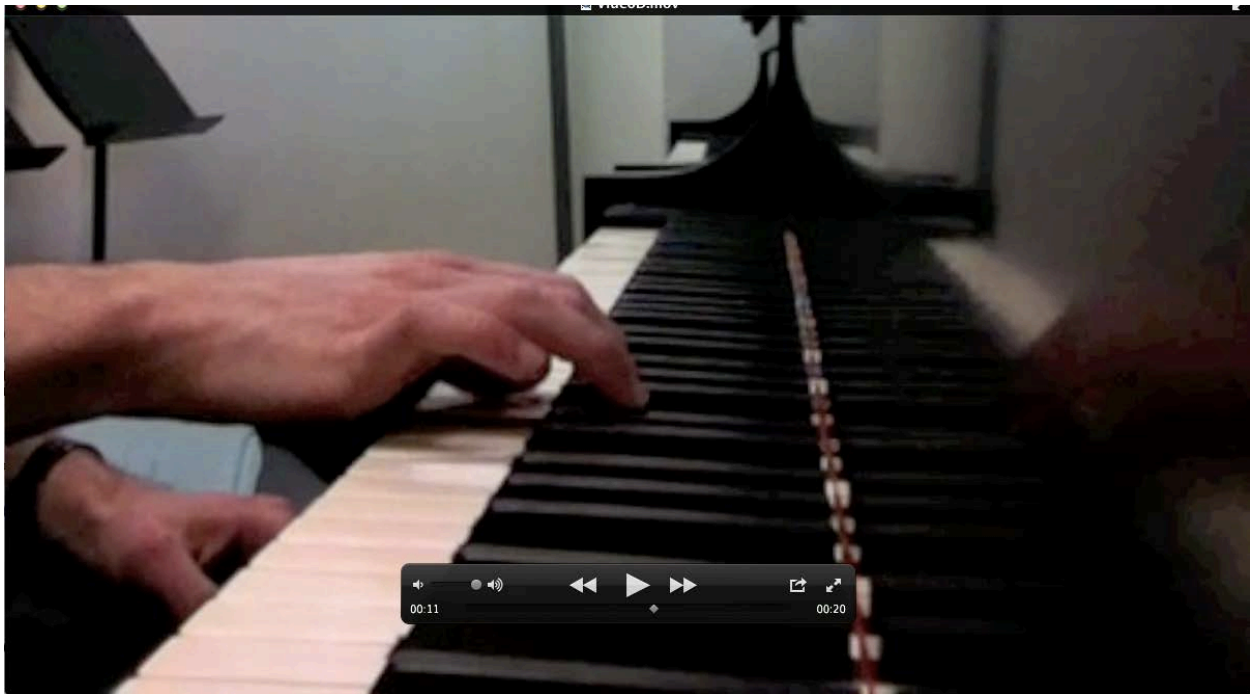


Figure 8: *Ondine*, theatrical hand splits presage flamboyant rupture, mm. 47-9<sup>220</sup>

<sup>219</sup> See **Figure 8**.

<sup>220</sup> See **Video C** and compare to **Video A**, 2:47-3:01.

Segmentations of melody elsewhere in the piece mark a subtle, perhaps clever challenge to normative ideals, but the tidal eruptions of mm. 42-49 are anything but subtle. Along with the ornamental variations in the subsequent sixteen measures, they foreshadow the most intense melodic rupture of all: the recapitulation.<sup>221</sup> By unevenly layering 32<sup>nd</sup>-notes grouped into fives, sixes, and sevens, metric dissonance reaches its height, and the piece's register reaches its greatest depth, roaring at the lowest B-natural on the keyboard. Swimming amid the chaos, struggling to assert itself as a voice of solidity, the descending whole-tone melody proves to be more of a byproduct of the accompaniment than a thing of real, thematic interest.<sup>222</sup> Having upset our expectations to hear a return of the primary theme, the ironic melody sinks downward, seeming (both aurally and visually) to meld with the splatter.



**Video E:** *Ondine*, isolated theme from Figure 3 (recapitulation).

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<sup>221</sup> See **Figure 3**.

<sup>222</sup> For comparison, the short **Video E** isolates the melody of the recapitulation [**Figure 3**], rendering it slowly without the metrically dissonant surroundings.

Perhaps such theatrical moments are the same ones for which Faure criticized his pupil in a letter the same year *Ondine* was published; no doubt Ravel's "lavish profusion" and "big effects"<sup>223</sup> rubbed many the wrong way, especially those within Faure's camp of *sincerists*. Yet, as we have seen, Ravel's least "sincere" moments—taken to be his bold-faced challenges to aesthetic tradition—deliver quite poignant rhetorical bite and certainly betray a more or less conscious subjective investment on the part of the composer. Ravel's musical structures gain meaning precisely because he determined to avoid that "sincerity" he took to be "the greatest defect in art."<sup>224</sup> Opting for sincerity's opposite, then, was a matter at once of knowing the term's significance, sensing its constructed nature, and then ironizing its praise. By working within normative discourse, even owning with great aplomb its most abjected terms, Ravel achieves that creative space Judith Butler holds "with great promise":

The subject who is "queered" into discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*.<sup>225</sup>

*Ondine* assumes the position of the other, the insincere, the hysteric, and the effeminate, only to reveal a profound falsity of the system through which those terms are pejorated. Ravel's hyperbole thereby works through reclamation of a once defeated femininity and declamation of an oppressive masculinity. As both subject and activist, the performer assumes rhetorical positions in a re-enactment of Ravel's queer sabotage (this time via stiletto): and the factory of

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<sup>223</sup> Carlo Caballero, *Faure and French Musical Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 251.

<sup>224</sup> Maurice Ravel, *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>225</sup> Butler, 232, original emphasis.

symbolic ideals receives another shock to the system. Wholeness, sincerity, gender, even substance are mere constructions whose logics, once revealed, will set a body free.



## 7.0 EPILOGUE

Though I have aimed to take the idea of body-based musicology to an intricacy beyond the sexual epithets of *Bolero* and the hushed rumors about *Daphnis* (with its special “talents”), there is a certain remainder in those assessments which persists even through my more sustained formulations. In his own scholarly contribution to the *Daphnis* banter, Lawrence Kramer marvels at the chorus’s having “not a trace of ethereality or transcendental intuition. Sensuous without apology, it arises at the intersection of the phantasmatic and the bodily.”<sup>226</sup> After exhausting the metaphoric explications and semiotic readings—after one has attached all possible words and sentences to “that moment!” in *Daphnis*, in attempt to distil a more absolute meaning—there remains in the text a blank line, equivalent to my friend’s widened eyes and labored tone of voice: “Oh, dude! That chord! Y’ know?” In the rules of live discussion, of course, my friend’s question warranted no response but, rather, held the place of a chunk of bodily thought and feeling, an experience so rooted in pre-notional viscera as to escape the grasp of words.

Far be it from me to *know* just how my friend felt at that orgasmic moment without having been there, at that time, beneath his skin. For I was having a difficult enough time understanding my own body (what it wanted, whether someone might want it, and for what

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<sup>226</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 208.

reasons), asking questions that still today sculpt that psychic image: how I, as a queer person, conceive (and ill-conceive) of my body and its efficacy in a society of gender prescription. I indeed wanted to empathize with my friend, to breach whatever boundary it was which cordoned off that type of knowledge and deemed it frivolous, shallow, or indecent. If he could not utter such a thing to me—if the material power of language had truly reached its limit—I wondered whether he could not, simply, show me.

## APPENDIX A

### A.1 ONDINE

“ Ecoute ! - Ecoute ! - C'est moi, c'est Ondine qui frôle de ces gouttes d'eau les losanges sonores de ta fenêtre illuminée par les mornes rayons de la lune ; et voici, en robe de moire, la dame châtelaine qui contemple à son balcon la belle nuit étoilée et le beau lac endormi.

“ Chaque flot est un ondin qui nage dans le courant, chaque courant est un sentier qui serpente vers mon palais, et mon palais est bâti fluide, au fond du lac, dans le triangle du feu, de la terre et de l'air.

“ Ecoute ! - Ecoute ! - Mon père bat l'eau coassante d'une branche d'aulne verte, et mes soeurs caressent de leurs bras d'écume les fraîches îles d'herbes, de nénu- phars et de glaïeuls, ou se moquent du saule caduc et barbu qui pêche à la ligne ! ”

Sa chanson murmurée, elle me supplia de recevoir son anneau à mon doigt pour être l'époux d'une Ondine, et de visiter avec elle son palais pour être le roi des lacs.

Et comme je lui répondais que j'aimais une mortelle, boudeuse et dépitée, elle pleura quelques larmes, poussa un éclat de rire, et s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisselèrent blanches le long de mes vitraux bleus.

Aloysius Bertrand<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Ravel, *Ondine*, 6.

## A.2 ONDINE

“Listen! Listen!—I, Ondine, am skipping those droplets across the lozenges of your sonorous glass, your dark window, lighted only by the bleak beams of the moon! Now, look: a castle!—and wrapped in watery silk, the castle’s lady, contemplating from her balcony the gleaming starry night, lovely over the lake’s quiet.

“Each ripple of the water is a sister sprite, swimming near the surface, along currents which lead windingly downward to reach my chateau-retreat—my palace: a liquid structure in the water’s depths, inside the triangle of fire, earth, and air.

“Listen. Listen!—My father gives voice to the water by splashing across its face a green alder branch; some of my sisters cradle in their sparkling arms the fresh green islands of lilies and gladioli, while others laughingly tease the bearded, silent willow, fishing with its fronds.”

Then the murmurs of her song faded away; and I felt a tremendous urge—her begging me to accept her ring for my finger, that I might become the spouse of an Ondine and return with her to her realm and reign as monarch of the lakes.

But when I responded with assertions that I already loved a mortal, she, pouting and upset, at first let fall a few tears, then burst into laughter and vanished into clear-dropped showers, trickling down my blue-glass panes.

Aloysius Bertrand<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Translation by Waring McCrady, used here with permission.

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